

Hello – and welcome (back) to my newsletters. Can it really be three years since the last one – so much has changed yet so much has stayed the same! You will have seen the reason for the long gap in the accompanying e-mail so I won't repeat it here, but just dive straight in!

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An inconvenient interregnum or a licence to learn?

Abandon the alliterations I hear you say... fair enough, but for those of you who listen to Vassos Alexander present Radio 2's morning sports update, you may, like me, think they add a certain impact to a sentence (for better or worse ...).

Although the last three years have very much reduced the wider level of involvement I have had in the sector I am passionate about; they have provided me with the opportunity to see life in the world of training and development from the other side of the fence, focussing particularly on apprentice based training. I have been able to see the frustrations of the ever-changing funding rules, the grudging acceptance of often personal and regularly pointless or unjustified whimsies of external quality assurers (EQAs) and the utter desperation to introduce consistency to "keep Ofsted happy"! On the other side of the coin, I have met so many people who are incredibly committed to doing a good job even when they feel the odds are stacked against them. Trainers, assessors, internal quality teams, administrators and managers desperate to do well by their learners; much of which often appears to go on unnoticed though that is not really the case.

Though I despair at much of the above, I remain hopeful that we can still take control of some of these areas. The SFA, I have to concede, isn't one of them, and those organisations who choose to work in that arena have to be prepared for the bureaucracy that goes with it. But the others we can control, or at least influence. Although I mentioned the poorer and therefore less credible EQAs earlier, it is, I think, right that we challenge those "requirements" and it is refreshing to see the good EQAs and indeed their respective awarding bodies telling us to do just that.

Ofsted is a different matter! As a former full-time and part-time inspector, I know the importance attached to an Ofsted inspection and the impact that an inspection grade has. I also know that Ofsted and most providers do have the interests of their learners at heart, but there are some frustrating moments along the way.

In January, I decided to enquire about a part-time leisure course at my local college that had caught my eye; a three hour a week evening class, fully funded by me! I completed an on-line application form (you know, the ones designed to speed up the process) which included providing details of my previous qualifications, my employment details and my age. Some four weeks later, I received an invitation for a 9.00am interview; which I was informed, would take three hours and include an assessment of my English and that I must attend as the course was heavily subscribed. The supporting information pack said that I should also take copies of relevant associated qualifications and perhaps a statement from my school. It was also important that the college could discuss with me the impact this course would have on my future career goals and aspirations!

I did point out that a letter from school would be difficult to get hold of, as the people that taught me are retired, or sadly no longer with us. I also advised that I could attend for an interview but, as a working person, not for three hours and I certainly had no intention of having my English skills assessed! As for my career aspirations – I couldn't help but wonder if no-one had read my application, or indeed, worked out I was applying for a leisure course. Eventually, I was told that I no longer needed to attend for interview as the course had received such little interest they weren't sure if it would run – which sounded very much like a "thanks, but no thanks" to me!

The point of all of this? Sadly an example of where the desperate need to provide a consistent approach makes the process completely unfit for purpose!

Finally, should you decide my opening attempts at alliterative analogies were so unappealing you no longer wish to receive this, please do let me know and I will take you off the contact list. I am attending the FE Week annual apprenticeship conference in London next week, so look forward to catching up with familiar faces throughout what looks like an interesting and informative couple of days.

Kevin Dowson