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New Year and all change

We are already one month into 2017 and this year promises to bring many significant changes to Apprenticeships and those who work within this world. Changes to SASE to incorporate British Sign Language and the Apprenticeship Levy comes into effect in April. All this and more in this bumper issue of the Federation Oracle.

Update on SASE Framework Withdrawals

Following a delay, the SFA have published a third batch of 15 SASE frameworks to be withdrawn. This follows a period of public consultation which ran during July/August 2016. Most of these to be withdrawn frameworks now have replacement Standards approved for delivery or had zero starts in the last two funding years. The 15 frameworks will be withdrawn to new starts from 1 October 2017. The last date for new starts will be **30 September 2017**.

SFA have also announced the deferral of the withdrawal date of a further 5 frameworks whose withdrawal was initially announced, as part of Batch 2, in May 2016. This deferral is as a result of further evidence and feedback that was received in relation to these 5 frameworks.

This announcement of further framework withdrawals does not impact any current learners, as they will continue to complete their Apprenticeship framework as usual. Also, once the withdrawal date for a framework has passed, any existing learners will continue to complete their Apprenticeship, on their agreed funding arrangements, and their Apprenticeship Completion Certificate can be claimed as normal.

The last date for new starts on withdrawn Frameworks will be updated on [Apprenticeship Certificate England \(ACE\)](#) and on the learning aims search on [the Hub](#). On the agreed withdrawal date, the Frameworks will be archived on [Apprenticeship Frameworks Online](#).

An updated [list of Apprenticeship Standards](#) is available online and over the coming months, SFA will announce their strategy and timescale for withdrawing the remaining live SASE frameworks.

For further information on the staged withdrawal of SASE frameworks, please refer to the [Apprenticeship changes](#) page on GOV.UK or contact the [service desk](#).

Rejections decreasing

Since ACE was introduced in 2012 rejections have consistently been a hot topic. In recent years we have made huge efforts to reduce rejections and with everyone's hard work we have now halved the 2012 rejection rate. At the end of 2016 we saw rejection rates hit a record low of 14.17% which is a great achievement for all. Having said this, unfortunately rejections crept up by 1% in January to 15.17%.

In 2015 we estimated that rejections cost the network £250,000. Following the effort that everyone has put in to reduce rejections rates, we estimate that this reduction has resulted in approximately a £20,000 saving across the network. We believe that this is still too high and could be reduced further. One of our reducing rejections prize winners has provided an insight as to how they have been working to reduce their rejections.

The team have been working together for almost a year and each team member is assigned individual targets which are then reviewed monthly. They find that by preparing the Apprentice files, before processing the claim on ACE, the team takes the opportunity to ensure everything is accurate. The team say that two useful tools to help them reduce their rejections is the online acceptable evidence guidance and the regular updates on the common rejection reasons through both the Oracle Newsletter and ACE notifications. With a new team member recently joining the team the ACE videos have been used and are a great help for both new and existing staff.

When asked what they would advise others trying to reduce their rejections they said *'The best advice I could give would be to prepare each learner in advance of making a claim and take your time when processing them to ensure no simple mistakes are made. Also we have found it useful to bear in mind the common rejection reasons which are regularly communicated by the Federation to ensure we are not making these mistakes. As a manager I have ensured rejections are a focus with the team and made them aware of the importance of processing claims accurately to minimise them, and we regularly look at their individual progress each month.'*

Coming SOON - Launch of Updated ACE-IT Tool

ACE-IT is the online training and assessment tool developed by the Federation and was first launched 2 years ago. It was designed to help support all ACE users in correctly identifying acceptable evidence, which is required to be submitted as part of all Apprenticeship Completion Certificate claims on ACE.

We are now pleased to announce the imminent launch of an updated version of the tool. ACE-IT has had a face-lift and will now have its own website from where you can both register for an ACE-IT account and log in to access the system itself. **Please note that as this is an updated system it will be necessary to re-register for an ACE-IT account even if you had one previously.**

Many of the changes have been driven by user feedback. As before, all exercises consist of 15 questions but some key modifications include:

- A larger question bank covering a wide variety of both evidence types and Awarding Organisations and designed to be in line with current regulatory and quality requirements.
- Option to create a customised exercise allowing you to focus on evidence from specific Awarding Organisations and/or particular types of evidence e.g. PLRs or Apprentice Consent Forms.
- Improved exercise review function enabling users, for questions answered incorrectly, to see where they went wrong and what the correct response/s should have been.
- Where appropriate direct links to additional relevant guidance and support materials are provided.
- Users can link their ACE-IT account to their designated Line Manager and, in turn, Line Managers will be able to see a summary of the exercise results for each of their linked users/team members.

An ACE-IT guidance document detailing these new features will be accessible via the new ACE-IT website. Keep an eye over the next few of weeks on your ACE notifications which will confirm when this new tool will be going "live"!

Maintaining the Standard – Claim Response Times

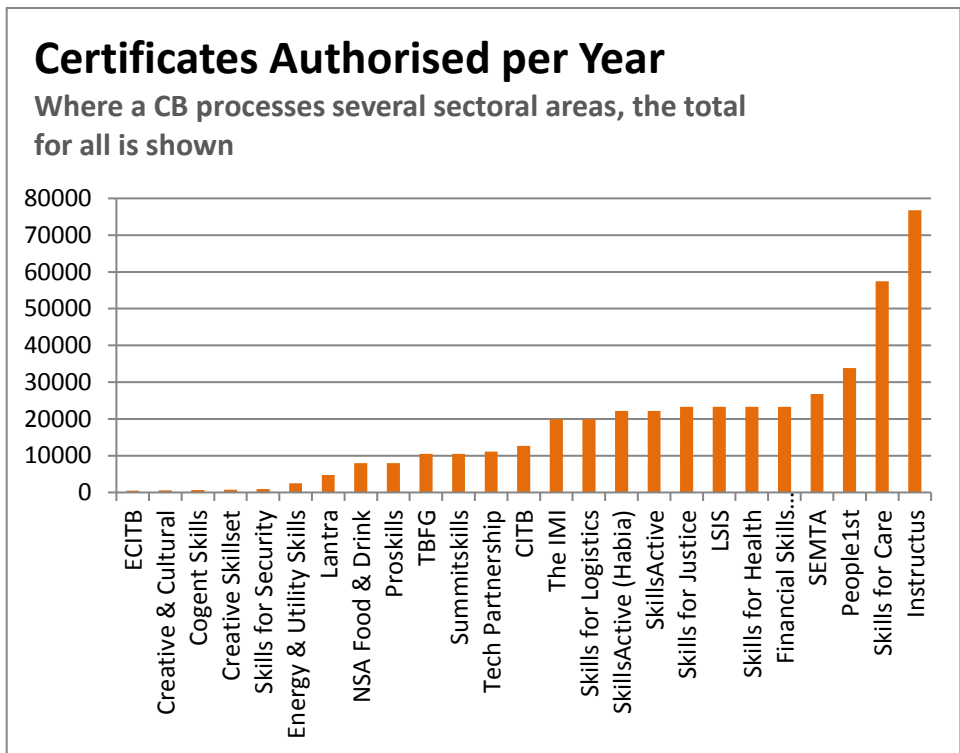
We are very proud of the quality standards we deliver in partnership with the Certification Bodies. We constantly measure performance and review if there is more that we could be doing to improve our overall standard of service. Each Certification Body receives monthly feedback on their performance and periodic audits to check the accuracy and service levels that they achieve.

Service levels are based on our annual [customer satisfaction survey](#). Each year we ask you to rate the performance of the Federation and any Certification Bodies you have dealt with during the year. The survey gives us rich data on all aspects of performance including:

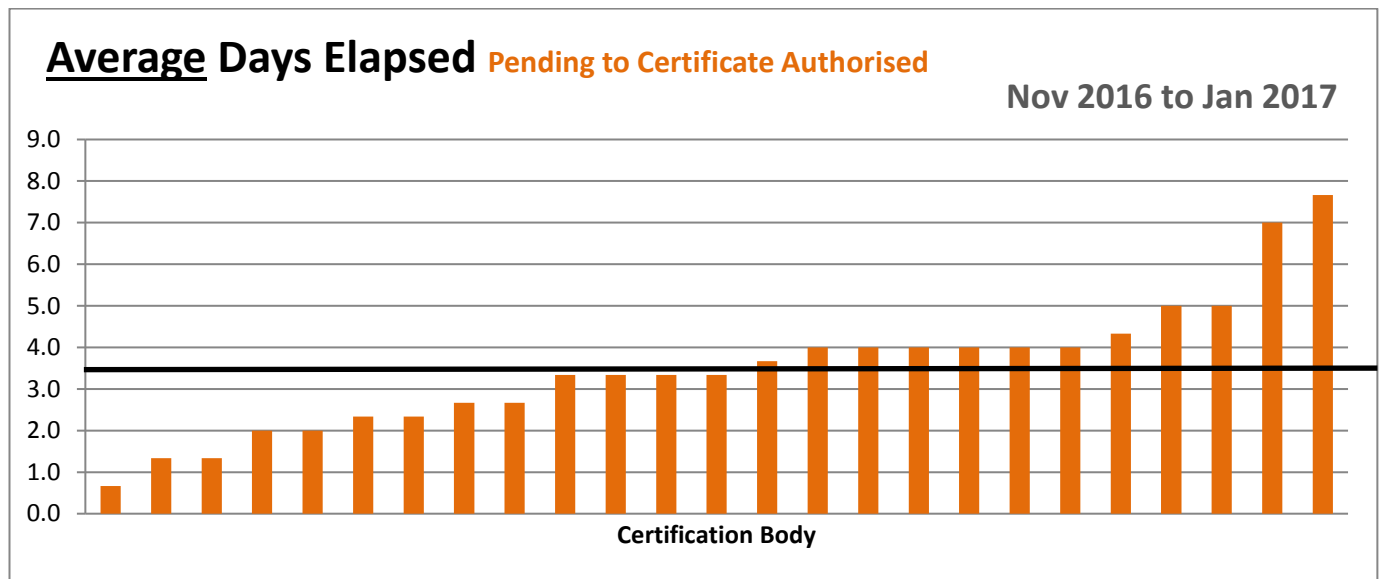
- Communication
- Speed of response to queries
- Quality / clarity of advice provided
- Friendliness / helpfulness
- Clarity and consistency in reasons given for rejection
- Responsiveness within the required 10 days
- Speed of printing and despatching the certificate/s

Each year, while you tell us that overall you are satisfied with the service provided, the number one issue that arises is the turnaround time from 'Pending' to 'certificate authorised' / printed. We realise that this is important to you and we do our very best to reduce this where we can, but all of the Certification Bodies handle very different volumes from a few hundred to over 70,000 certifications per year.

Note: Some Certification teams process across a number of sector areas shown in the graph above. For example – The Skills for Justice team process certifications for Justice, Health, LSIS and Financial Skills Partnership. The 23k total refers to the total volume the team process and not the actual volume relating to each sectoral area.



Whilst we know this is not the whole story, we monitor the average time each Certification Body takes to process a Certification. Below are the latest results from November 2016 to January 2017.



The average is 3.5 days and whilst some are higher, they all meet the 10 working day requirement.

When you complete the 2017 survey, we would ask that you bear in mind the volume that each Certification Body processes. Please take into account what you feel is reasonable given the volume that a body processes per year. We can monitor when a certification is authorised, but we can't check when a certificate is posted and received. In some cases a Certification Body may wait until they have a few certificates to post out to you. We want to know your overall experience of the time taken to complete the process.

We pass on the results of the survey to each Certification Body, in particular their strengths and weaknesses. In some instances we want to follow up on your feedback and we ask for permission to do so within the survey.

The quality of service that we offer will continue to be a key measure in our overall Quality Assurance plan and we are grateful to you for providing feedback each year.

Communicating with a Certification Body

As well as processing your claims for Apprenticeship Certificates, the Certification Bodies are on hand to answer any queries you may have about the certification process. Whilst the Support Team at FISSS are more than happy to help, often the Certification Body is the most appropriate call in the first instance due to their knowledge of the frameworks and the industries you work with. This is particularly true when querying a rejection or ordering a reprint of a certificate.

For ACE users, there is sometimes confusion about the best method of contacting a Certification Body. **There is no functionality within ACE that lets you communicate with Certification Bodies directly.** Often users will leave comments on the Basic Information or Status tab of an ACE Apprentice record but please be aware that this does not alert the Certification Body immediately. These comments will not be seen until the record is reviewed as part of routine certification processing which may take up to 10 working days. For urgent queries, [please see the ACE website for the best contact details for each Certification Body.](#)

Standard Certification

Framework certification volumes continue to grow. Framework starts were at a record level last year so we expect completions to be at record levels for at least the next twelve months. The quality delivered by the Certification Bodies remains high and rejected applications have now dropped to less than 15%. A massive well done to everyone for all the hard work.

The SFA kicked off looking after certification for English standards on 1st January 2017. Sadly we have just learned that they will not be sticking to the high quality set by you. Instead of turning applications around in an average of 3.5 days then will be doing it in an absolute minimum of 17 days, but it could be as long as 53. That is progress I suppose. But of limited value to the Apprentice who is waiting for a pay rise.

The Institute for Apprenticeships will launch in about one month as the guardian of quality. We have urged them to accept nothing less than improvements on the current system. At present they have no measures that will enable them to see if there has been an improvement or not. Some might say that this is deliberate. I believe that they have a lot of sorting out to do. From Standard proliferation and overlap, gaps, assessment concerns and management of quality that targets are at the bottom of their list, but it is targets that drive behaviours.

Forthcoming Changes to SASE

As many of you may now be aware, British Sign Language (BSL) qualifications are to be accepted as an alternative to the English qualifications currently required by Apprentices in England. This is where BSL is the Apprentice's primary language. This change will require an update to current SASE legislation and is set to come into effect in April this year. If an Apprentice has already achieved the required level of BSL prior to starting their Apprenticeship then they no longer have to undertake Functional Skills or a GCSE in English as part of their Apprenticeship programme. If they haven't already achieved the minimum English requirement for their Apprenticeship, they can undertake BSL at Level 1 or 2. This change is significant as it now removes a barrier that may have previously prevented some learners from undertaking, and achieving, an Apprenticeship. For further details click [here](#).

Also in the pipeline are further updates to SASE which will see, for the first time, a broader range of English and Maths qualifications becoming acceptable as meeting the transferable skill requirements of current SASE Apprenticeships. This will include equivalent qualifications from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We will keep you updated on the progress of this work and the planned date for implementation, once this has been finalised.

Interface Project

As part of our commitment to reduce bureaucracy and speed up the certification process the Federation have been developing an Interface with the SFA which will automatically download Apprentice achievement data in to ACE.

After much hard work and near implementation of this facility we were notified of the planned changes to SASE (mentioned previously) adding an unforeseen hurdle at the end of the project. As we are unaware of the details of

these impending changes and how they would affect the project we decided to temporarily pause the project and delay implementation.

This short delay does mean that we are able to continue user testing and address any issues identified which should ensure a smooth implementation. We will communicate a revised plan and keep you updated in the near future but please be assured that we remain focussed on implementing this facility as soon as feasibly possible. We apologise for this delay and any inconvenience this may have caused.

Policy Round Up

It seems like Ministers and government officials were busy over Christmas as we have seen a flurry of activity since the start of the New Year. The draft strategic guidance came out from the Department for Education for the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA), the government published a long awaited Industrial Strategy and the Institute for Apprenticeships published their draft operational plan – all 3 of these were open for consultation and FISSS has been responding on behalf of the network of Sector Skills Councils, Sector Standard Organisations and National Skills Academies that make up our membership.



All of these documents could have a profound impact on what the further education and skills landscape looks like over the coming years. Some of the key issues raised in the [Institute for Apprenticeships: draft strategic guidance](#) are around a strong quality brief for the IfA, and the need for it to become the lead organisation “in assuring apprenticeship quality”. The detail as to how the IfA will interact with Ofsted, Ofqual, SFA and other agencies remains to be seen but the focus remains on employer leadership. So close on the heels of the draft guidance the employer board for the IfA was announced. The board comprising 8 members has representatives from sectors ranging from engineering and food and drink through to the creative industries and 2 FE college principals are also on the board. We await the announcement of the permanent chair of the board and the permanent CEO of the IfA in due course.

The [Institute for Apprenticeships operational plan for consultation](#) published on the 27th January sheds a bit more light on the roles and services that they will undertake on behalf of the government as they will be running to panels to approve new Apprenticeship standards and assessment plans, they will advise government on funding bands for Apprenticeship standards and quality assure end point assessments (although it has been made clear that they should be choice of last resort). This consultation remains open until the 27th February so worth a look. It also confirms that the IfA has overall responsibility for certification but that the function will continue to be carried on by the SFA on the Apprenticeship standards, noting that the ACE system will continue for certificate processing under the Apprenticeship framework system.

As part of the preparation for a post Brexit world it was important for government to get out a new Industrial strategy which was published on 23rd January [Building our Industrial Strategy](#). There were strong references to the importance of skills and a high quality technical education system and also of ‘sector deals’ between government and industries who came together to offer solutions to the productivity gaps.

In the meantime operational information also continued to flow from the SFA with the final announcements on funding bands both the Apprenticeship frameworks and standards for 2017/18 and further information on the levy for employers, on how to use and manage their levy accounts continues to be updated. With 1st May the effective date that employers will be able to spend their levy.

The final piece of the puzzle for a fully integrated technical education system is more detail on what is happening with post 16 Skills plan and their aim for some of the new class room based Technical Education routes being in place for teaching from September 19. That update we are assured is due imminently!