

# Report on Desk Based Investigations into the Provision of Apprenticeship Standards for Pathology Support Workers

## 1. Aims of Investigation

The aims of this investigation were to:

- explore Apprenticeship Standard provision for Pathology Support Workers, and specifically, whether the Standards developed by the Healthcare Sciences Trailblazer group will meet Pathology Support Workers needs
- gain feedback from employers of the Pathology Support workforce on whether the new Healthcare Science Apprenticeship standards meet their needs
- conclude whether or not the new Level 2 Healthcare Science Standard or the Level 3 Laboratory Technician Standard is likely to be a suitable replacement for the Level 3 Apprenticeship Health (Pathology Support) framework and if not why not.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Modernising Scientific Careers and the Healthcare Science Workforce

The Modernising Scientific Careers Programme, set up in 2008, attempted to bring together disparate groups of the Healthcare workforce under the umbrella of one professional group, the Healthcare Science (HCS) workforce. The HCS workforce is formed of more than 50 specialisms employing around 52,000 staff in England. It is split into four recognised divisions: Life Sciences, Physiological Sciences, Physical Sciences & Engineering and Clinical Bio-informatics. Pathology is a subgroup of the Life Sciences division within HCS. The aim of the Modernising Scientific Careers Programme was to develop a common approach to training, standards, regulation and curriculum development for the HCS workforce. The MSC programme led to the development of a training and career pathway structure with the following defined roles that were to be applicable to all Healthcare Science disciplines:

- Healthcare Science Assistant
- Healthcare Science Associate
- Healthcare Science Practitioner
- Clinical Scientist
- Clinical Healthcare Scientist

The Academy for Healthcare Science (AHCS) was established as a joint initiative of the UK Health Departments and the professional bodies. The AHCS has been commissioned to undertake and support key projects including:



- Developing consistent regulation for the healthcare science workforce e.g. by establishing accredited voluntary registers where none exist.
- Implementing a system to assess and confer 'equivalence' of the existing qualifications and experience individuals have, mapped to the outcomes of formalised quality assured training programmes.
- Quality assuring education and training in partnership with other stakeholders.
- Developing common standards for healthcare science practice.

Those who train as a Healthcare Science Practitioner (though a life science degree) can register as a 'Biomedical Scientist' on the HCPC Register (a band 6 role).

## 2.2 Apprenticeship Framework for Pathology Support Workers

To date, where employers choose to use an Apprenticeship to train Pathology Support Workers the level 3 Apprenticeship Framework in Health (Pathology Support) has often been the apprenticeship of choice. A level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support is the major qualification component of the current level 3 Apprenticeship framework and must be undertaken by all Pathology Support Worker apprentices.

As part of the Government's reforms, this framework will be withdrawn to new starts on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2016. Representation was made to extend this date but this was not successful. Skills for Health has been made aware that some employers are unhappy about the imminent withdrawal, and that, although the uptake on the framework is small, where it is used, it is valued by employers. In withdrawing the Apprenticeship framework there will no longer be a mechanism to utilise public funding for the level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support and it is highly likely that withdrawal of the qualification will follow.

## 2.3 Healthcare Sciences Trailblazer Activity

The Healthcare Sciences Apprenticeship Trailblazer (HCS TB) group formed 3 years ago following on from the Modernising Scientific Careers Career Framework development work and is chaired by the NHS Chief Scientific Officer for England.

The HCS TB group initially submitted Expressions of Interest (EOI) for Apprenticeship Standards in HCS at levels 2, 3 and 4 and all EOIs were approved. Work began on the Standards at these three levels, however first submissions of the Standards were rejected by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). BIS feedback required further evidence of distinct occupational roles in order to continue with Standards at consecutive levels 2, 3 and 4.

Employers on the HCS TB group agreed to continue to develop the Standards at levels 2 and 4 and not pursue the level 3 Standard. The Standards were based on the principles outlined in the 'Good Scientific Practice' (GSP) guidelines, developed by the Academy for Healthcare Science. It was agreed an academic



programme should be included as part of the Standard at levels 2 and 4. These two Standards were subsequently submitted to BIS and approved.

At a later date, EOIs for HCS Standards at levels 5 and 6 were submitted. The level 5 EOI was initially submitted as there are a number of Foundation Degrees available in HCS and employers said these were an important part of the career pathway. The level 6 EOI was accepted however the level 5 was rejected on grounds that the occupations were not significantly differentiated at level 5 and 6.

### 2.3.1 Healthcare Science Apprenticeship Standard Summary

Level	Title	EOI	Standard	Qualification
2	Healthcare Science Assistant	Approved	Written and approved	Mandatory Level 2 Diploma in HCS developed by Pearson
3	Healthcare Science Assistant	Approved	Drafted and rejected	N/A
4	Healthcare Science Associate	Approved	Written and approved	Mandatory Level 4 Diploma in HCS to be developed by Pearson and due to be ready by Sept 2017.
5	Healthcare Science Associate	Rejected	N/A	N/A
6	Healthcare Science Practitioner	Approved	In development	Degree

## 3. Methodology

To carry out this investigation telephone discussions and email exchanges were held with key stakeholders including the consultant leading on the HCS TB activity, Pearson Awarding Organisation and employers within the Pathology workforce, some of whom are members of the HCS TB group.

Employers were canvassed for their views on whether they consider the level 2 and level 4 HCS Standards to be suitable replacements for the level 3 Apprenticeship in Health (Pathology Support). Employers were also asked for feedback on whether they consider the level 3 Laboratory Technician Standard (developed by the Life and Industrial Sciences Trailblazer Group) to be fit for purpose for Pathology Support Worker apprentices.

Stakeholders were questioned about the impact on employers and the workforce of moving from the current system of an Apprenticeship framework at level 3 (and Foundation Degrees at level 5) to the new system



of Apprenticeship standards and levels 2, 4 and 6. They were also asked about the preferred next steps; to work within the new level 2, 4, 6 system or to work together as a group of employers to pursue a level 3 and level 5 option for Pathology Support Workers.

As part of this investigation, the level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support from the level 3 Apprenticeship in Health (Pathology Support) framework was mapped to the new Pearson level 2 Diploma in Healthcare Science (to be included in the level 2 HCS Apprenticeship Standard) and the Level 3 Laboratory Technician Apprenticeship Standard (see Appendix 1).

## 4. Findings:

### 4.1 Healthcare Science TB Qualification Developments

Pearson is the Awarding Organisation that has developed a new level 2 qualification for the level 2 Healthcare Science Assistant Apprenticeship standard and who will be developing a new level 4 qualification for the Healthcare Science Associate Apprenticeship standard.

There are over 40 specialisms reflected within the new level 2 Diploma in HCS. In developing the qualification, Pearson consulted with employer experts from the sector in each specialism and asked them to share draft units within their employer networks. Pathology employers were asked which units from the level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support should be available in the level 2 Diploma in HCS. As a result, some units from the current level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support have been used within the new level 2 Diploma in HCS, although some have been amended and are now at level 2 rather than level 3 (see Appendix 1).

The new level 4 Diploma in HCS once developed may contain more of the level 3 units from the Diploma in Pathology Support, or content from the level 3 units redeveloped at level 4. Employers have advised that where possible they would like to use units from any applicable current or old qualifications as a starting point. Pearson expressed the opinion that the level 4 Diploma in HCS may be suitable for some Pathology Support Workers, although this may be for CPD or progression purposes.

In response to employer feedback, Pearson will be using units from a range of qualifications as a starting point for some of the specialisms within the level 4 Diploma in HCS including:

Level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support:

[http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/NVQ-and-competence-based-qualifications/Pathology-Support/2010/Specification/9781446909195\\_NVQ\\_Comp\\_L3\\_PathSup\\_Iss3.pdf](http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/NVQ-and-competence-based-qualifications/Pathology-Support/2010/Specification/9781446909195_NVQ_Comp_L3_PathSup_Iss3.pdf)

Level 3 NVQ in Laboratory Science

<http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/NVQ-and-competence-based-qualifications/Laboratory-Science/2010/Specification/N027134-L3-Dip-in-Lab-Science-QCF-220711.pdf>



Laboratory and associated technical activities qualifications at Level 3

<http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/NVQ-and-competence-based-qualifications/Laboratory-and-Associated-Technical-Activities/2010/Specification/N033530-Specification-NVQ-Level-3-Diploma-in-Laboratory-and-Associated-Technical-Activities-QCF-Issue-2.pdf>

Laboratory and associated technical activities qualifications at Level 4

<http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/NVQ-and-competence-based-qualifications/Laboratory-and-Associated-Technical-Activities/2010/Specification/N027137-L4-Dip-Lab-Assoc-Tech-Activities-QCF-120711.pdf>

Level 3 Diploma in Blood Donor Support

[http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/NVQ-and-competence-based-qualifications/Blood-Donor-Support/2010/Specification/9781446908655\\_NVQ\\_Comp\\_L3\\_BDS\\_Issue\\_3.pdf](http://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/NVQ-and-competence-based-qualifications/Blood-Donor-Support/2010/Specification/9781446908655_NVQ_Comp_L3_BDS_Issue_3.pdf)

## 4.2 Employer Feedback

Many employers recruit new Pathology Support Workers to Agenda for Change pay band 3 posts. These Support Workers join with existing level 2 qualifications (including GCSEs). Employers have made use of the level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support either on its own or as part of the level 3 Apprenticeship in Health (Pathology Support) some of whom have progressed onto Foundation Degrees at level 5. During the consultation, employers shared that this tried and tested method of progression is currently working and meets their needs.

Of the employers contacted, all expressed discontent with the change from the current system of levels 3 and 5 to levels 2, 4 and 6 progression routes. One employer mentioned that they have previously used a level 2 qualification in this area for their support workforce and that this level of qualification *'did not give them what they needed'*.

More than one employer expressed concern about the impact of the change on progression to level 5 and 6 degrees, stating that Universities currently require a level 3 qualification on entry. Removal of the level 3 progression step will result in Pathology Support Workers having to progress from level 2 to 4 before being accepted by Universities for level 5 and 6 degree programmes. However, it is generally accepted that the jump from level 2 to level 4 is challenging and may be unachievable for some apprentices.

Of note, one employer stated that they think the level 4 Apprenticeship standard is the least required level and was unclear on the rationale behind developing a standard at this level. They considered a level 4 standard to be *'over the top'* for a Pathology Support Worker.

Several employers mentioned their concern that the 2, 4 and 6 level model doesn't fit with the rest of the healthcare workforce where Apprenticeship standards have been developed at levels 2, 3, 5 and 6.



Although some employers expressed a wish to retain an Apprenticeship requiring the completion of the level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support when asked about next steps and whether they would wish to collaborate to develop new standards for Pathology Support Workers at levels 3 and 5, employers seem reluctant to initiate any new standard development work. This maybe because they don't have the resource to dedicate to further Apprenticeship development work or it could be because they don't understand the leading role that employers now play. When questioned about preferred next steps one employer said *'Really it depends what HEE demands/requires'*.

### 4.3 Higher Education Institution Feedback

To explore the progression issue further, employers were asked to provide contact details of individuals working within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that offer degree level HCS programmes. The HEIs were contacted and informed that employers have expressed some concerns about the impact of Apprenticeship changes on progression routes for Pathology Support Workers into HEIs and specifically on entry requirements for Foundation Degrees or degree programmes in HCS subjects. The HEIs were asked whether the proposed changes will affect entry requirements.

HEIs have not been able to respond within the investigation period. Feedback around this issue may be forthcoming at a later date after the HEIs approached have had time to discuss the matter internally and with employers.

### 4.4 Mapping Feedback

#### See Appendix 1-Pathology Support Mapping

The new level 2 HCS maps reasonably well across to the current level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support, however there do appear to be some gaps. Some of the units in the level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support are in the level 2 Diploma in HCS but have been adapted so that they are now a level 2 unit rather than level 3 e.g. Handling Information.

The Laboratory Technician Standard at level 3 also maps quite well across to the Level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support, although it lacks the patient focus of the Diploma in Pathology Support and is written in a much more generic way. There is a requirement of the Laboratory Technician Standard that 'Apprentices must complete a level 3 or 4 qualification 'which is *recognised for professional registration by RSciTech*, prior to completing end point assessment'.

When asked for feedback on the suitability of the level 3 Laboratory Technician standard for the Pathology Support workforce one employer said



'that it is not in a healthcare setting' and that their workers 'do not do (outcomes) 8 or 9 at all' and that 'they do not register for RSciTech'.

The occupational profile within the standard states that 'Laboratory Technicians work in a wide range of organisations, *including but not exclusively*, chemical, primary and secondary pharmaceutical, biotechnology, formulated products, nuclear companies and analytical science services'. One employer mentioned however that their workers would not complete the Occupational Skills and Knowledge sections 8-'Analyse, interpret and evaluate data and identify results requiring further investigation seeking advice of senior colleagues as appropriate' and 9-'Understand and apply statistical techniques for data presentation'. In order to complete an Apprenticeship Standard, workers would need demonstrable evidence for each statement within the Standard.

The requirement that 'Apprentices must complete a level 3 or 4 qualification in a science or technology discipline relevant to their occupation, which is recognised for professional registration by RSciTech' would need to be evidenced and negotiations would need to be carried out with RSciTech over whether they would accept the registration of Pathology Support Workers and the associated relevant Pathology Support qualification. This would also go against the overall MSC/HCS aim of having a common route for registration for all Healthcare Scientists.

## 5. Conclusion:

One of the aims of this investigation was to establish whether the new level 2 HCS standard or the level 3 Laboratory Technician Standard can replace the level 3 Apprenticeship in Health (Pathology Support).

When consulted, employers have not mentioned any dissatisfaction with the *content* of the level 2 Diploma in HCS, only unhappiness at the overall *level* it is pitched at. Of course a level 2 qualification cannot be said to fully replace a level 3 qualification, as the two will not lead to the same outcome in terms of learner achievement, however the units contained within the new level 2 Diploma in HCS can be said to be similar to those the level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support (see Appendix 1).

Pearson have suggested that the new level 4 Diploma in HCS will also help to replace the current level 3 Diploma in Pathology Support although this may be for CPD or progression purposes. As the level 4 qualification has yet to be developed, mapping against the two of these cannot take place.

Alternatively, the level 3 Laboratory Technician standard provides an Apprenticeship standard of an equivalent level to the framework which is to be withdrawn. When consulted on this standard, employers have expressed concern that it is not sufficiently contextualised for the healthcare environment and there are 2 outcomes which may not apply to Pathology Support Workers. The requirement for RSciTech registration may be an additional barrier to the suitability of the Laboratory Technician standard for Pathology Support Workers.





Although employers expressed a number of concerns about the withdrawal of the L3 Apprenticeship in Health (Pathology Support) and provision of new Apprenticeship standards at levels 2, 4 and 6, the appetite from employers to pursue standard development at levels 3 and 5 is not currently evident. However, this may change if HEI's identify barriers to progression for Pathology Support Workers without the step at level 3.

