

Health and Safety Executive Board		Paper No: HSE/09/66	
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WORKFORCE STRATEGY: DEGREE REQUIREMENTS FOR HSE RECRUITS			

Purpose of the paper

1. To provide the Board with background information on the use of degrees and equivalent qualifications as recruitment criteria for trainee regulatory inspectors in HSE.

Background

2. At the meeting on 25 February the Board considered a general update on HSE's workforce as the first in an annual series requested by the Board's Performance Reporting Sub-Group. The paper prompted discussion on the need for trainee inspectors and other recruits to hold a degree or equivalent qualification.

3. Traditionally, applicants for trainee regulatory inspector posts were required to hold a degree or equivalent level qualification but in 2000 this requirement was relaxed and the recruitment process moved towards a competency based approach. However, applicants were still required to demonstrate an "equivalent level of achievement through work-based learning and/or other academic or professional qualifications" and undertake a series of tests designed to identify candidates with the ability to undertake a demanding post graduate training programme.

4. The change was intended to attract a higher proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) applicants and therefore improve the diversity of our cadre of regulatory inspectors. Though ethnic groups produce comparable levels of graduates, for example BME women are more likely than their white counterparts to hold a degree or equivalent level qualification¹, research at the time suggested that public service was not seen as an attractive career path for BME graduates.

Argument

5. The new approach did not entirely achieve the desired outcome, though there was initially a small increase in the proportion of BME regulatory inspectors (rising from just under 2% in 1999 to around 4% by 2006), since then the proportion has shown a slight decline (3.7% in 2008). There are, of course, many factors affecting the diversity of our recruitment and it is equally likely that the initial success enjoyed from 2000 onwards could have been attributable to a more targeted advertising strategy. More generally, relatively few non-graduate applicants meet the required standard for appointment (only 5% of the most recent intake from this approach did not hold a degree or equivalent qualification).

6. Logistically, it proved extremely difficult to assess the large volume of applications objectively and with sufficient rigour against the "equivalent level of achievement" criteria, particularly where this was claimed through a work based learning route. Though the range of tests used in the selection process are a

¹ 22.5% versus 20%. Source: Government Equalities Office

reasonably good test of the required competencies they are not infallible and cannot test an applicants aptitude to subsequently undertake a sustained period of post graduate level study.

7. Most significantly, feedback from Organisational Development Managers (ODMs) and line managers in FOD began to show that a disproportionately high number of candidates recruited without a degree were not progressing well with the new training arrangements based around a post graduate diploma. This was felt to be a particular problem with candidates recruited from within HSE where the requirement for degree level achievement was further relaxed and substituted with an assessment of suitability by line managers. There was also a rise in the attrition rates with 15% of the trainees recruited in 2005 leaving within three years.

8. As a result, a decision was taken to require applicants from 2009 to hold a degree or equivalent academic or professional qualification². It was felt this would be a more objective and measurable selection criterion, whilst still opening up opportunity to people holding a wide range of vocational qualifications. For example, City and Guilds Level 5 in disciplines such as engineering and construction, certain qualifications in sales and marketing, and BTEC Higher National Certificates are all deemed equivalent to a degree. This gives greater assurance that successful candidates will be able to complete the rigorous training involved including the new post graduate diploma introduced in 2007. An added consideration was the increased likelihood of recruiting trainee inspectors with a scientific or engineering background with the potential to be developed as specialist inspectors in the future (specialist inspectors are a particularly challenging recruitment market).

9. The outcome has been:

- We maintained a strong response with more than 4,500 applicants. Clearly the economic climate may have been a factor but our research also shows that the perception of a graduate programme with a structured development route is particularly attractive to applicants.
- We have seen an increase in the overall quality of recruits (candidates are ranked A – D at assessment with ‘A’ being ‘Outstanding’ and ‘D’ ‘Unacceptable’). Requiring graduates to hold a degree or equivalent qualification has increased the proportion of A and B candidates from 60% to 70%. We will be evaluating the quality of recruits more systematically during the training period and, in particular, assessing whether the new cohort of trainee inspectors are demonstrating the required competencies and making satisfactory progress with the post graduate diploma.
- The recruitment exercise generated sufficient candidates for a major intake of trainee inspectors in March 2009 and a further intake in October 2009 thereby saving the considerable time and cost of an additional national recruitment campaign.
- From a diversity perspective, between 2008 and 2009 there has been an improvement in the success rate of women (up to 38% from 29%), though there has been no significant change on race or disability. Action is in hand to address this in the future and current work to develop our ‘employer brand’

² The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) sets out the levels against which a qualification can be recognised in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and links to the qualifications systems of other countries.

will include a communications strategy to target BME graduates and increase the attractiveness of HSE as an employer of choice.

10. Looking forward, the educational and economic landscape means that we can anticipate a good supply of graduates in the recruitment market for the foreseeable future and we are confident that HSE will remain an attractive proposition as a career choice. Internally, we will continue to give our own staff the opportunity to be considered for trainee inspector roles and, subject to this being a realistic aspiration, HSE will fund study towards a degree level qualification enabling existing staff who do not already hold a degree to meet the selection criteria.

11. Our experience with trainee inspectors also influenced our approach to the recent recruitment of Construction Inspectors on fixed term appointments where our aim was to attract staff who could be quickly trained to represent HSE on some of the most dangerous sites we deal with. It was vital that we could have confidence in their competence to judge when to take enforcement action - and to do so on their own. We therefore specified practical experience in a managerial capacity and with degree/equivalent qualifications. There was some scepticism that this would prove an overly demanding specification- there being an apparent presumption in some quarters that the industry was either generally not qualified to degree level, or that the salary we were offering would not attract graduates. We have, however, attracted 23 impressive recruits.

Conclusion

12. It is not, of course, inconceivable that non-degree applicants could fulfil the role of trainee inspectors, but opening up our recruitment criteria to allow this has shown there is a greater risk of candidates failing to meet the exacting standard required. There is more likelihood that they will struggle with the demanding training programme, particularly the new post graduate diploma programme. Our experience consistently confirms that the role requires staff with a high academic ability to meet the demands of a job that is often complex and challenging.

13. It has also not made a significant difference to the diversity of our inspector cadre. Although there was initially a small improvement, it is not certain whether this was due to relaxing the selection criteria or other factors. The overwhelming majority of recruits continued to be graduates anyway. Logistically, it proved time consuming and difficult to assess candidates objectively.

14. The change in selection criteria to require a degree or equivalent appears to have produced a larger pool of good quality recruits who we believe should be better equipped to undertake a sustained period of post graduate level study. Longer term, this may in turn provide a pool of inspectors from which we can draw people with the background and experience to develop as specialist inspectors, and perhaps save time and cost on some of the in-depth sifting tools that have been necessary thus far to assess applicants.

15. It is too early to say whether returning to graduate recruitment criteria will help improve the diversity of our inspector cadre but our future strategy will be to target the undoubtedly large pool of BME graduates rather than seek alternative sources of BME recruits.

Action

16. The Board is asked to note and endorse the current approach to recruitment of trainee inspectors.

Paper clearance

17. The paper has been cleared by Geoffrey Podger.