

Apprenticeships in Polymer related Industries

Your Input Requested

Final Report (Version4.1)

Introduction

Some time ago, Manchester Polymer Group decided to investigate the status regarding Polymer Apprenticeships in the North West of England to get a feel for the current situation and to determine if we can use our resources to publicise, promote and campaign for necessary improvements assuming that we had the support of our network.

Responses Please to mpg@iom3materialscycle.org

In Summary

Polymer related courses are often heavily weighted towards processing and engineering aspects. They are available at several establishments face-to-face or on-line. Some face-to-face are hands-on.

Eg Preston College, UCLan,
City of Wolverhampton Coll, University of Warwick,
Smithers Shawbury,
BPF

There is a shortage/absence of courses for lab-based apprentices where a deeper knowledge of polymer structure and characteristics, types and properties, use and action of additives etc are necessary to perform required workplace tasks. This shortage was demonstrated by a small-scale survey of MPG members, shown below,

Polymer Science Questionnaire

Question	Yes	No	Other/Comments, including "rather not say"''''
Company	70%		
Do you employ apprentices?	90%		
Do you require Polymer Science/Processing/related courses etc for them?	80%		
At what level?			
Level 2/3? (BTEC)	57%		
Level 4/5? (HNC)	43%		
Are you able to find suitable providers?	20%	80%	
Locally?			
Which college/provider?			
Have you been offered Alternative courses? (eg Chem/Phys/Engineering)	50%	50%	

Training providers require decent size cohorts of students if they are to develop courses (30-40 in the case of Cogent Skills) to cover their costs. Large companies (Siemens, BAe etc) can almost manage this alone and so more or less shape their own courses. SMEs have to work in concert which rarely happens so they are disadvantaged.

Cogent Skills are willing to help us but nothing will be ready/approved before September 2024. Pearson Edexcel are in process of reforming their qualifications for apprenticeships (start September 2025) (submission to DfE at the end of July this year)

In the initial instance employers would likely focus on the processing aspects of elastomers, or other polymers rather than diving into the deeper technical understanding where we see a current shortage (this may be symptomatic of manufacturers wanting apprentices to understand how to produce product more efficiently rather than modify any underlying characteristics)

It may be worth, if possible, collating a list of polymer-based courses/apprenticeships available currently. With a view to highlighting where the gaps are

If we're able to collect data on the available courses vs the current need from industry there's an opportunity to review the supply vs demand picture. We may see a preference to providing courses / apprenticeships focused on processing and engineering as these are the more commonly required skill sets. As noted without sufficient in-take numbers a course cannot get off the ground.

How we could look to address this balance and encourage more of the lab-based development courses is not certain, - But first step is to identify if that is the current picture.

Funding

Courses approved by DfE carry funding for the 16-19 age range and in some cases for adults. Funding for apprenticeships can also be accessed via local arrangements (LEAP, UCLan, and various business hubs.)

In the future

We should let these two threads develop, hold a watching brief and advise or assist as necessary.

Approach IoM3 re training.

Useful links (This is not an exhaustive list)

<https://www.bpf.co.uk/polymer-zone/career-zone/apprenticeships/relevant-polymer-apprentice-standards.aspx>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/search-for-apprenticeship-standards#apprenticeship-standards-approved-for-delivery>

<https://cogentskills.com/membership/sip/>

<https://www.bpf.co.uk/polymer-zone/career-zone/apprenticeships/faqs.aspx>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apprenticeship-funding-rules>

<https://www.preston.ac.uk/>

<https://www.uclan.ac.uk/>

<https://www.wolvcoll.ac.uk/>

<https://warwick.ac.uk/>

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/>

<https://www.manchester.ac.uk/>

D Starmer 21st October 2023 on the behalf of MPG Education Subcommittee