

## PLUMBING TRAINING - THE REALITY AND DANGERS OF FAST TRACK TRAINING

### INTRODUCTION

*Until just a few years ago, someone wishing to train as a plumber in the UK only had one option - to undertake a formal employed apprenticeship lasting around 4 years. The parties involved in such an arrangement included an employer, who provided both employment and work experience, a college or training centre which provided off-the-job training and assessment and the apprentice.*

*In recent years there has been a large increase in the number of training organisations which offer short training courses for individuals wishing to become a qualified plumber. Such courses have led to concerns particularly from those undertaking such courses about the value of the “qualifications” achieved and this paper has been prepared to offer guidance to those considering a plumbing career.*

### WHAT IS A QUALIFIED PLUMBER?

The Plumbing Joint Industry Board (SNIJIB)<sup>(1)</sup> which is made up of representatives from the industry Trade Union (Unite the Union)<sup>(2)</sup> and the employers (SNIFE)<sup>(3)</sup>, regulates and determines the skill level and proficiency of those who work in the plumbing industry in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The JIB requires a new entrant to the industry to achieve the S/NVQ<sup>(4)</sup> in Plumbing at Level 3 (*although it would be possible for individuals qualified to S/NVQ in Plumbing at Level 2 to receive some industry recognition*) and such qualification must be accompanied by the minimum on-the-job-experience with an employer of 4 years. Any qualification less than S/NVQ at Level 2 would not be acceptable to the JIB.

In Scotland, there is **no** Level 2 qualification in Plumbing awarded although Level 2 qualifications are still awarded in the other 3 countries of the UK, including Northern Ireland. The Level 2 was withdrawn in Scotland several years ago when SNIJIB and industry employers expressed the view that Level 3 was the desired qualification. Consideration is being given to adopting a similar policy in Northern Ireland and withdrawing the Level 2 award there.

### FAST TRACK TRAINING PROVIDERS

Recent years have seen the creation of a large number of organisations which offer plumbing training outside of the traditional apprenticeship route. There are a number of common features of the courses offered by these organisations:

- **They are short**

The courses offered vary in duration but a few weeks or months is not unusual. Although SNIJIB accepts that some individuals could satisfy the requirements to achieve a Level 3 S/NVQ in less time than is required in the industry recognised and approved four-year apprenticeship, it does not believe that any individual could meet these requirements in a few months.

- **They are expensive**

None of the courses offered by these providers could be described as cheap with fees of many thousands of pounds being typical. SNIFE believes that there is no justification for such charges in return for the delivery of “qualifications” below the standard required by the industry.

- **They are promoted through misleading advertising**

It is common for such courses to be advertised using claims such as there is a predicted shortage of 30,000 plumbers in the UK over the next 5 years. This figure was, at one time, the accepted requirement as shown in research undertaken by the Construction Industry Training Board. This data is now well out of date and the requirement has been significantly reduced in the light of the current economic climate, which has seen large numbers of qualified plumbers being made redundant.

The courses also often promise to give individuals, with no background in the industry, skills to allow them to run their own plumbing business in just a few months. SNIPEF strongly refutes such claims and it would not accept for membership any business which was based on the proprietor having had a few months' training.

There is concern within the industry about the inappropriate use of logos within the promotion of these courses. The City and Guilds<sup>(5)</sup> and BPEC<sup>(6)</sup> logos often appear on advertising and websites. Such logos could imply that the courses are endorsed by these organisations. In reality they simply mean that the providers are approved by these organisations to offer one or more courses accredited by them, including one-day courses on subjects such as Water Regulations/Bylaws and courses which fall short of the minimum qualifications required by the industry for an individual to become a competent plumber.

- **They rarely lead to industry required qualifications**

SNIPEF is not aware of many of this new breed of training providers which can deliver an S/NVQ Level 3 qualification. It also believes that many of them deliver courses which even fall short of providing S/NVQ Level 2 qualifications. In many cases the qualifications on offer are meaningless and simply do not justify the use of the term "qualified plumber" by their recipients.

The City and Guilds 6129 qualification is often cited as the result of attendance at one of these short courses. This is a Technical Certificate which is intended to be delivered and awarded as part of a formal NVQ qualification. Technical Certificates are not awarded in Scotland. It was never intended that Technical Certificates would be a stand-alone certificate and those who only hold a Technical Certificate do not meet the minimum criteria to become a qualified plumber.

## **ADVICE FOR THOSE WISHING TO BECOME PLUMBERS**

SNIPEF offers the following advice to anyone considering a career in the plumbing industry:

- Look for an apprenticeship with an industry employer. Apprenticeships are now available regardless of the age of the entrant and an employer is likely to receive some financial support towards the cost of your training. It should not cost the entrant anything for off-the-job training fees and he or she will be paid normal apprenticeship wages during the period of the apprenticeship.
- Be extremely wary of sensational advertising which promises complete training as a plumber within a few months.
- Ensure that any training which you undertake will lead to the achievement of the qualifications which are required by the industry- ideally S/NVQ at Level 3.
- If in doubt about the value of a particular course, contact the SNIPEF or SNIJIB offices for advice.

## **SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION**

- (1) SNIJIB ([www.snijib.org](http://www.snijib.org))
- (2) Unite the Union ([www.unitetheunion.org.uk](http://www.unitetheunion.org.uk))
- (3) SNIPEF ([www.snipef.org](http://www.snipef.org)),
- (4) S/NVQ – the Scottish or National Vocational Qualification
- (5) City & Guilds ([www.cityandguilds.com](http://www.cityandguilds.com))
- (6) BPEC ([www.bpec.org.uk](http://www.bpec.org.uk))