



Does apprenticeship work for adults?

The experiences of adult apprentices in England

Executive Summary

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The Research Team

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The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. More information is available at: www.nuffieldfoundation.org.

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1. Introduction

This report presents findings from the first research study of government-supported apprenticeship in England to focus on the experiences and perspectives of apprentices aged 25 and over and of their employers. It also provides evidence about the training, upskilling and reskilling of adult workers more generally. Apprenticeship has long been associated with preparing young people to enter the labour market. The UK and Australia are unusual in that government funding is available to support apprenticeships for adults, including those already in employment, from the age of 25 upwards.

Government funding for adult apprenticeships has been available since 2005. Despite this, there has been a surprising lack of public or scholarly debate about what they are for and how they should be organised. This report starts to address this gap. It argues that the current use of 'apprenticeship' as a generic term for government-supported training dilutes the meaning and value of apprenticeship. In doing so, it also aims to stimulate discussion about what forms of adult training will be needed in response to the international challenge to develop 'active ageing' policies as working lives extend.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in two phases: a) a literature review and a statistical mapping of government-supported apprenticeship in England; and b) case study research in five organisations (covering Social Care, Health Care, Hospitality, Transport, and Energy) employing and training adult apprentices and interviews with policy-based key informants.

3. Statistical picture of adult apprenticeship

Under the Coalition government, the number of adult apprentices has grown¹. The full year figures for new registrations in 2012-13 showed that 45 per cent were aged 25+, 32 per cent 19-24, and 22 per cent under 19. Over 3,000 apprentices were aged 60 or older. The majority of under-19 starts were male (55%), whereas the majority of 19-24 (52%) and 25+ starts (61%) were female (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships>). There was a marked contrast between the age of apprentices in the high volume sectors. Health and Social Care, Management and Customer Service dominated the starts for adult apprentices, whereas the majority of under-19s were in Business Administration, Hairdressing and Children's Care, Learning and Development. Our findings have also shown that older apprentices are more likely than their younger peers to start a Level 3 or above programme. They show that patterns of participation in apprenticeship reflect wider patterns in the labour market in terms of the size of the service sector compared with the manufacturing and construction sectors, and the persistence of stereotypical occupational gender imbalances.

The increase in adult apprentices has diversified the apprentice population as a whole, by dramatically increasing the number and proportion of female apprentices. Whereas the majority of under-19 apprentices are still (as has historically been the case) male, females are in the majority in the older groups. Our findings also provide evidence to illustrate the complexity of the intersection between apprenticeship starts, sector, gender and age. Traditional apprenticeship sectors dominated by young males retain a strong gender imbalance. Hairdressing, a traditional apprenticeship dominated by females becomes slightly less unbalanced with the arrival of an older intake. New apprenticeship sectors, such as Industrial applications that are dominated by older males develop a slightly better gender balance amongst the older start population.

There are two key forms of administrative data, the number and type of participating employers, and the number of apprentice 'conversions' that would enable studies such as this to provide a more detailed statistical picture of apprenticeship participation. However, currently, neither of these is publicly available.

¹ As this report was being finalised, the 2013-14 headline statistics were made public. They show an increase in the number of 19-24 age apprentices to 36 per cent of all starts and a decline in the number of 25+ apprentices to 37 per cent of all starts. The percentage of apprentices aged under 19 rose slightly to 27 per cent. The official statistics note that 'learners starting more than one apprenticeship will appear more than once' (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships>).

4. Organisational Drivers for Adult Apprenticeships

All our case study organisations were facing challenges about the capability and age profile of their workforces and in relation to staff retention. Managers' comments about the key factors that motivated them to provide adult apprenticeships focused on: a) workforce planning; b) organisational culture, workforce quality and performance; and c) corporate social responsibility.

Two organisations (*Energy and Transport*) had a long history of recruiting young people into three-year apprenticeships in engineering-related disciplines, and also, at *Transport*, in Business Administration. At *Energy*, apprentices aged 25 and over are new recruits to the company and participate in the same apprenticeship programmes as their younger colleagues. At *Transport*, 'adult apprentices' are existing employees who have been with the company for varying amounts of time. Their apprenticeship programmes are separate from the ones for the newly recruited young people. In the case of *Social Care* and *NHS Trust* (Health Care), they recruit some new individuals into adult apprenticeships and also place existing employees on apprenticeships. For these organisations, there was a strong drive to retain experienced employees aligned with a 'grow your own' skills policy. At *Hospitality*, all new employees (as well as existing staff), regardless of age, are given the opportunity to join an apprenticeship programme once they have successfully completed the company's induction period. Apprenticeship is seen as a vehicle for staff retention and for developing a cadre of future managers.

All the organisations reported that their workforces had to be capable of adapting to the considerable challenges their businesses were facing. At the same time, maintaining the goodwill of their workforces was key to ensuring employees would accept the need for upskilling and retraining. Whilst the relationship between corporate social responsibility and adult apprenticeship was strongest at *Social Care*, the other organisations reported that this was important for their businesses. For example, *Transport* wanted to respond to rising regional youth unemployment, whilst for *Health Care*, located in an area of inner-city deprivation, creating more jobs for local people was an essential factor for regeneration.

All the organisations reported that a 'grow your own' policy was crucial to their sustainability, efficiency and ability to compete in different product markets. Apart from *Energy*, the organisations were using the term 'apprenticeship' because that is the 'brand name' for a source of government funding. There was very little evidence that they had developed a strong concept of apprenticeship as a distinctive model of learning.

5. Adult Apprentices' Experiences and Perspectives

The majority of the apprentices were already employed (often for many years) by their organisation, when the option to take up an apprenticeship arose. The extent to which take-up was perceived as mandatory or voluntary for existing employees varied. Apprentices cited a range of benefits including: supporting career change and progression; gaining qualifications and certifying competence; new learning; a flexible approach to training; and the opportunity to improve their English and maths. Apprentices who had worked for an organisation for some time welcomed the chance to gain formal qualifications to provide credible evidence about their ability to do the job, build their confidence, and help improve their career prospects. In contrast, apprentices hired as new recruits with limited or no previous relevant occupational experience were much more likely to cite the opportunity for significant new learning as a core benefit of their apprenticeship. Apprentices participating in structured programmes with off-the-job training and regular support from a workplace mentor or supervisor were most enthusiastic about the quality and extent of their new learning.

All government-supported apprenticeships include mandatory requirements for apprentices to achieve credits in English and maths. Whilst it can be challenging to develop good quality provision and some apprentices were negative about this aspect of their programme, many have had positive experiences, particularly in relation to their job capability and confidence. The opportunity to develop computer literacy was also shown to have a powerful positive effect on adult learner identity. The main challenges for adult apprentices were: a) balancing the demands of the assessment requirements for the apprenticeship with the demands of the job and domestic commitments; b) tensions related to the balance of theory and practice; and c) progress beyond the apprenticeship.



6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Our findings show a latent demand from adults for training and qualifications (including in English, maths and ICT) to support the fulfilment of their career aspirations. Many of our respondents believe they have the expertise, experience and potential to make a productive contribution to their places of work and to the economy more generally. Yet, the flexibility which government currently affords employers and training providers has led to a visible lack of consistency in the quality and substance of apprenticeships. Some apprentices experience little more than the accreditation of their existing knowledge and skills, with an absence of significant new learning, whilst others achieve new levels of occupational expertise and build a platform for further progression. This is a serious issue both in terms of the use of public money and because employers are missing the opportunity to fully capitalise on the value of apprenticeship for long-term workforce development and the improvement of their businesses.

The report demonstrates that employers and training providers could benefit from using the analytical power of Fuller and Unwin's Expansive-Restrictive Framework to evaluate how far their current 'apprenticeship' programmes actually equate to acknowledged apprenticeship characteristics.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

1. The term 'Apprenticeship' is being misused. Fresh thinking, involving employers, providers and trades unions is needed to develop appropriate forms of publicly funded training to meet adult employees' demands for upskilling and retraining.
2. Government should review the current reliance on the achievement of qualifications as the measure that training has occurred. Accrediting adults for existing skills is worthwhile, but should not be classed as an apprenticeship. Adults value qualifications when they provide access to new learning.
3. Employers and providers are working together to meet the needs and build on the potential of an ageing workforce. This best practice needs showcasing and using as the catalyst for new approaches.
4. Adults want to improve their maths, English and ICT skills. Employers, providers and trades unions should be supported by government to meet this demand by ensuring that all forms of publicly funded training include opportunities to improve and practise these skills in the workplace.
5. Training providers and trades unions should use the considerable potential they have to ensure that adult apprenticeships involve substantial training.
6. Government and other stakeholders should review the extent to which publicly funded apprenticeship should challenge gender occupational stereotyping and lead to career progression for women and men.

Questions adult apprentice employers need to ask

- If apprentices are existing employees, what additionality is being achieved by the apprenticeship over and above the accreditation of existing competences and how are their existing knowledge and skills being built on?
- Do managers and trainers understand the different kinds of knowledge and experience attributed to younger and older apprentices and how these can be utilised to support inter-generational learning?
- Is there sufficient time allocated for the development of new skills and knowledge to enable your apprentices to progress beyond their immediate job role and/or to take on higher levels of responsibility?
- If job roles in your organisation are pegged to specific grades, will the apprenticeship enable individuals to progress to higher grades?
- Do managers within the organisation understand the purpose of apprenticeship for older employees and the implications for the type and amount of productive work they are expected to perform?
- What do you want the apprenticeship to achieve that is over and above and different from your standard workforce development activities?
- Do the mandatory English and maths requirements of the government-supported apprenticeship provide a vehicle for identifying latent potential in your workforce and a means for motivating older workers who have been reluctant to engage with training for upskilling and/or retraining purposes?

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