



Apprenticeships at Level 4 and above

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Executive summary

The government has an agenda to grow the number and quality of apprenticeships.¹ In addition, the government has set objectives to widen access to apprenticeships and ensure that programmes at all levels support social mobility for people from diverse backgrounds².

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake research to explore the extent to which apprenticeships at Level 4 and above are supporting social mobility for people from diverse backgrounds; employers' motivations and barriers to offering higher-level apprenticeships; and apprentice experiences of undertaking programmes at Level 4 and above. The research explored whether and how the demographic profile of apprentices at Level 4 and above differ:

- from the general higher education cohort
- from apprentices at other levels
- across different apprenticeship standards.

The research took a mixed method approach involving analysis of Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data and publicly available Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, as well as qualitative interviews with eight employers, 10 apprenticeship providers and 20 apprentices.

Apprenticeships at Level 4 and above

Despite an overall fall in apprenticeship starts in recent years, the numbers of starts at Levels 4 and above have steadily increased. Between 2014/15 and 2018/19, the proportion of apprenticeship starts at Level 2 fell from 60 per cent (298,280 starts) to 37 per cent (143,590 starts). Meanwhile, the proportion of apprenticeship starts at Level 4 and above have increased from four per cent (19,771 starts) in 2014/15 to 19 per cent (75,058 starts) in 2018/19³.

Employers paying the apprenticeship levy were more likely than non-levy payers to take on apprentices at Level 4 and above. In 2018/19, 25 per cent of apprenticeship starts with levy paying employers were at Level 4 or above, in comparison with just 11 per cent of apprenticeship starts with non-levy paying organisations.

The qualitative interviews with employers and providers suggest that the apprenticeship levy has been part of the motivation for larger employers to offer higher-level apprenticeships, and that employers are using higher-level apprenticeships strategically to meet their business needs. These include developing staff knowledge and skills, filling

¹ HM Government (2015) [English Apprenticeships: Our 2020 Vision](#).

² These aims are set out in the government's benefit realisation strategy for apprenticeship reform: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-reform-programme-benefits-realisation-strategy>

³ All data in this section can be found here: [Apprenticeship and traineeship data](#): April 2020.

skills gaps, encouraging staff retention and facilitating staff progression. Employers' use of higher-level apprenticeships has also been driven by employers' improved familiarity with apprenticeships and the increasing availability of higher-level standards.

The main barriers experienced by employers interviewed, which prevent them from offering apprenticeships at Level 4 and above, include: managing the minimum 20% off-the-job training requirement for senior staff; a shortage of progression routes to higher-level apprenticeships, for instance in construction; and a lack of local provision or apprenticeship standards available to meet their needs. Providers also described challenges in delivering apprenticeships at Level 4 and above, including attracting qualified tutors and changes to funding caps which made some higher-level standards financially unviable.

Some providers felt that these barriers could result in a levelling out or decline of employer use of higher-level apprenticeships. However, employers, particularly large employers, predicted that the use of higher and degree-level apprenticeships will increase as more standards become available. It should be noted that the research was undertaken prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Employer attitudes towards and decision making about apprenticeships may have subsequently changed.

Profile of apprentices at Level 4 and above

ILR data from the 2018/19 academic year was analysed to better understand the profile of people undertaking apprenticeships at Level 4 and above. This analysis explored differences between the profile of people on higher-level apprenticeships with those on Level 2 and Level 3 programmes. Publicly available HESA data was used to draw comparisons between apprentices and the profile of higher education students.

In 2018/19, 60 per cent of apprentices on higher-level programmes were aged 25 and above, however there were large differences between levels. Just over three quarters (76 per cent) of apprentices on Level 5 programmes were aged 25 or above (and 45 per cent were aged 35 or above); far higher than the proportion of apprentices at Level 4, 6 and 7. Higher education (HE) students were younger than apprentices at comparable levels, with only 22 per cent of first year undergraduates aged 25 or over. Age differences between apprentices and first year postgraduates were less apparent, where 52 per cent were aged 25 or above.

Nearly half (48 per cent) of apprentices in the academic year 2018/19 were women and 52 per cent were men. While women were slightly underrepresented at most levels, there was a substantially higher female participation rate in Level 5 programmes, with women accounting for 61 per cent of apprentices at this level. This difference can be partially explained by the gender split within sectors. In 2018/19, most undergraduates (57 per cent) and postgraduates (60 per cent) were women.

The analysis also reviewed the profile of underrepresented groups undertaking higher-level apprenticeships including apprentices from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)

backgrounds, people in disadvantaged areas, and apprentices with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD). For context, 15 per cent of the working age population is from a BAME background and 18 per cent of the working age population have a declared LDD. There was slightly improved representation of BAME people on Level 4 and above apprenticeships (16 per cent) than at Levels 2 and 3 (13 per cent). Apprentices from BAME backgrounds accounted for 20 per cent of those on Level 7 programmes. Apprentices from Asian backgrounds were more likely than people from any other background to be on a Level 7 programme. Apprentices from Black backgrounds were more likely than people from any other background to be on Level 5 programmes. People from BAME backgrounds were better represented in HE, making up 30 per cent of first year undergraduates and 27 per cent of first year postgraduates.

Apprentices with LDD were less likely to be on a higher-level programme, making up only eight per cent of apprentices at Level 4+, compared to 13 per cent at Level 2 and 10 per cent at Level 3. People with LDD were also better represented in HE, making up 14 per cent of first year undergraduates. Qualitatively, employers and providers said that their ability to support apprentices with LDD varied depending on the availability of specialist provision and their recruitment processes.

There were notable differences in the profiles of apprentices from the most deprived areas in comparison to the most affluent areas. Apprentices on higher-level apprenticeships accounted for 30 per cent of all apprentices in the most affluent areas, in comparison to just 18 per cent of apprentices from the most deprived areas. Employers and providers said that this reflects the lower than average achievement rates and qualification levels in deprived areas and regional differences in the availability of higher-level apprenticeships. Interviewees also highlighted that a lack of access to these opportunities could be exacerbated by poor transport links in deprived areas.

Apprentice experiences

Apprentices who were employed by their organisation before they started their programme were motivated to enhance their career progression and personal development. They were also motivated by the prospect of gaining the equivalent benefits of a higher-level qualification with minimal impact on their personal time and finances. People who joined their organisation as apprentices said that accessing certain occupations without incurring student debt was a key motivation. Both groups of apprentices valued work-based learning offered within an apprenticeship as opposed to mainly classroom-based approaches.

Interviewees reported that the main barriers preventing access to higher-level apprenticeships were a lack of awareness, as well as misconceptions and stigma about the quality of apprenticeship programmes. Apprentices who were employed at their organisation prior to starting their programme said that managing the apprenticeship alongside their current workload was an additional barrier preventing take-up of higher-level opportunities. Older apprentices are also more likely to have wider commitments, such as childcare or caring responsibilities to balance with a demanding programme.

Suggestions to improve access to higher-level apprenticeships largely focussed on increasing the promotion and awareness of these opportunities. There were key pieces of information that apprentices felt would have addressed some of their initial misconceptions. This included information about the range of opportunities available through higher-level apprenticeships, dispelling myths about pay rates and highlighting support available for apprentices on-programme. Interviewees said that employers, schools and apprentices could most usefully support the dissemination of these messages.

To increase access to higher-level apprenticeships for underrepresented groups, it was suggested that employers open their offer to new staff and promote these widely. Other suggestions to widen access included financial support at the start of a programme, guidance to help employers engage with a more diverse workforce, and the expansion and promotion of pathways to higher-level apprenticeships.

The quality of support from employers and providers throughout an apprenticeship was seen to have a large impact on apprentices' experiences and ability to complete their programme. Valued support from providers included high quality teaching and the availability of tailored tutor support and specialist support services. Employer support, including that from line managers and colleagues in the workplace, was crucial to ensure that apprentices managed their minimum 20% off-the-job training over the course of their apprenticeship. Apprentices highlighted the need for tripartite meetings between themselves, their employer and their provider to ensure that support was agreed at the outset. They also expressed the importance of ongoing communication between the employer and provider to ensure that support is maintained for the duration of their apprenticeship.

Suggestions for improving the quality of support for higher-level apprentices included:

- Apprentices being provided with upfront information about content, tasks, timescales, workplace responsibilities and how to access support available to them prior to starting their apprenticeship.
- Apprentices, providers and line managers agreeing from the outset how the minimum 20% off-the-job training will be protected and managed, and the types of employer support the apprentice will access. This prior commitment can be used to monitor support throughout the apprenticeship.
- Line managers supporting apprentices during the programme through regular catchups to review progress and identify any support needs, including ensuring that the workplace culture is supportive of apprentice needs.

Introduction

The government has an agenda to grow the number and quality of apprenticeships⁴. As part of a commitment to raising quality and employer engagement, the government has introduced a set of reforms to the system. These include the introduction of the apprenticeship levy⁵, which came into force in 2017, and the transition from apprenticeship frameworks to employer-designed standards⁶. The government also introduced degree-level apprenticeships, the first of which were available from November 2014.

The government set out its aims for apprenticeships reform and how these will benefit apprentices and employers in a benefits realisation strategy⁷. This included objectives to widen access to apprenticeships and ensure they support social mobility for people from diverse backgrounds. The government introduced targets to boost the representation of apprentices from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds and apprentices with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD)⁸. They have also made efforts to increase the proportion of high value apprenticeships in disadvantaged areas⁹.

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake research to explore the extent to which apprenticeships at Level 4 and above are supporting social mobility for people from diverse backgrounds; employers' motivations and barriers to offering higher-level apprenticeships; and apprentice experiences of undertaking programmes at Level 4 and above. The research explored whether and how the demographic profile of apprentices at Level 4 and above differ:

- from the general higher education cohort
- from apprentices at other levels
- across different apprenticeship standards.

⁴ HM Government (2015) [English Apprenticeships: Our 2020 Vision](#).

⁵ The apprenticeship levy is paid by employers with a pay bill of over £3 million per year. Levy paying employers have a digital account, from which they can draw down funding to pay for apprenticeship training and assessment.

⁶ Apprenticeship frameworks are qualification focused and involve ongoing units-based assessment. In contrast, standards are occupation-focused, with an end point assessment. Apprenticeship standards are developed by employers and contain the skills, knowledge and behaviours an apprentice will need to have learned by the end of their apprenticeship. Apprenticeship standards will replace frameworks by 2020.

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-reform-programme-benefits-realisation-strategy>

⁸ The benefits realisation strategy included a target to increase the number of apprenticeship starts by people in both of these groups by 20% by 2020.

⁹ [Opportunities through apprenticeships](#) is a pilot project working with four local authorities (South Tyneside, Nottingham, Portsmouth and Torbay) to create opportunities for more apprentices from disadvantaged areas to undertake high value apprenticeships with higher earnings potential and progression.

This report presents the findings from the study and identifies areas for consideration in the future development of apprenticeship policy.

Methodology

The research took a mixed method approach involving analysis of Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data and publicly available Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, as well as qualitative interviews with employers, apprenticeship providers and apprentices.

Analysis of administrative data

The analysis presented in this report is based on ILR data shared by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) on apprenticeships in the academic year 2018/19. To explore the profile of apprentices on programmes at Level 4 and above, the report includes analysis on:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Learning difficulty or disability (LDD) status
- Level of prior qualification
- Geography (including index of multiple deprivation)
- Sector subject area

ILR data was also analysed to compare the profile of apprentices at higher levels with apprentices on programmes at Levels 2 and 3. In addition, publicly available HESA data was used to compare the profile of apprentices at Level 4 and above with higher education students.

The statistics presented in this report differ from the data published in the national statistics provided by DfE on apprenticeship participation, which seek to show total activity in the system.¹⁰ Rather than count total activity, this analysis counted each individual once in order to explore the demographic profiles of apprentices.¹¹

¹⁰ The latest data is available on the gov.uk website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/further-education-and-skills-statistical-first-release-sfr>

¹¹ In the published national statistics, apprenticeship participation represents the number of people who have attended one day or more on an apprenticeship programme in the given academic year. A learner recorded as studying more than one apprenticeship programme at the same provider at the same level is counted once in the data at that level. If recorded as having studied at another level they will appear in data tables at that level also, but in the total count of learner participation they will only be counted once where studying at the same provider. If a learner is recorded as participating on apprenticeship at different providers they would count twice, once at each provider. The national statistics approach is based on the learner reference

Qualitative interviews

The study included a qualitative strand of research to explore the key research questions from the perspective of eight employers, 10 training providers and 20 apprentices. Apprentices were sampled from the academic year 2018/19. Thirteen of the apprentices were in the process of completing their apprenticeship, and the remaining seven had completed their programme.

Employers were sampled to include a range of perspectives from different sizes, sectors and geographical regions. It should be noted that seven out of the eight employers interviewed were large and only one was an SME. The original methodology had included 10 employer interviews, however fieldwork stopped earlier than planned due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the remaining two SME interviews were not able to take place.

Providers were sampled to ensure a range of provider types, sector subject areas delivered and geographical regions. Apprentices were sampled on a range of characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, whether they were a new or existing employee when they started their programme, level of apprenticeship, sector subject area and geographical region.

The full sample frame for participants is listed in Appendix 1.

Employers and providers were identified and recruited through a combination of publicly available information and existing contacts gained through L&W's wider work on apprenticeships¹². Gaps in employer and provider size, sector and geographical location were filled using ILR data. Apprentices were identified and recruited using ILR data. All participants were recruited using a combination of email and telephone approaches. Interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and were audio recorded. They were analysed using a framework approach to draw out themes and patterns in the evidence, particularly relating to the sampled characteristics.

The use of 'respondents' in this research refers to viewpoints shared across employers, providers and apprentices. Where differences exist within and/or between individual respondent groups these groups are named. The use of 'higher-level apprenticeships' in this research refers to apprenticeships at Level 4 and above. Specific levels are referred to where there are clear differences.

The findings from the qualitative research are not intended to be, and cannot be taken as, representative of wider populations of employers, providers of apprentices. The use of 'all', 'most' and 'some' in this report illustrate the prevalence of views amongst research participants and are not generalisable to the wider population. Nevertheless, the findings

number (LRN) and UK provider reference number (UKPRN), whereas this report uses the Unique Learner Number (ULN) and LRN.

¹² An opportunistic approach to sampling was taken in the first instance due to delays receiving the ILR data.

do provide insight into the breadth of issues and views that exist within the wider population of employers, providers, and apprentices.

Structure of report

This report includes analysis of:

- Level 4 and above apprenticeships, exploring trends in the growth of these higher-level apprenticeships and employer motivations for offering these.
- The profile of apprentices undertaking programmes at Level 4 and above, including how this profile compares with those on lower level apprenticeships or higher education students.
- Apprentices' experiences of their higher-level programmes, exploring the factors which impact on their ability to complete their apprenticeships.

The report concludes with a summary of findings and considerations for policy and practice.

Apprenticeships at Level 4 and above

This chapter explores the factors that motivate employers to offer apprenticeships at Level 4 and above, as well as the barriers they face in doing so. The findings are based on the perspectives of employers and training providers interviewed.

Key chapter findings

- The profile of apprenticeships has changed over the past few years. While the volume of apprenticeships starts has fallen overall, there has been an increase in higher-level apprenticeship starts at Levels 4 and above, from 19,771 in 2014/15 (four per cent of total starts) to 75,058 in 2018/19 (19 per cent of total starts).
- In 2018/19, a quarter (25 per cent) of apprenticeship starts with levy paying employers were at Level 4 or above. Employers stated that their main rationale for using higher-level apprenticeships was because they align with the skills needs of staff they want to upskill. Using their apprenticeship levy is a motivating factor for levy paying employers to offer higher-level apprenticeships. Providers highlighted that these programmes tend to be more expensive than lower-level programmes and enable employers to spend more of their levy quicker.
- The qualitative findings suggest that familiarity with apprenticeships and the increasing availability of higher-level apprenticeship standards are enabling employers to meet a range of business needs, including recruiting and upskilling staff.
- The main barriers experienced by employers in offering apprenticeships at Level 4 and above include: interpreting and managing the minimum 20% off-the-job training requirement for senior staff; a shortage of progression routes to higher-level apprenticeships; and a lack of local provision or apprenticeship standards available to meet their needs.
- The main barriers experienced by providers in delivering apprenticeships at Level 4 and above were attracting qualified tutors and changes to funding caps which made some higher-level standards financially unviable to deliver.
- Some providers felt that these barriers could result in a decline of employer use of higher-level apprenticeships unless changes were made to ensure apprenticeships were financially viable for providers and employers, alleviate the impact of the minimum 20% off-the-job training and increase the flexibility of standards. These views were in contrast to employers, who predicted that the use of higher and degree-level apprenticeships will increase as more standards become available.

The volume and profile of apprenticeships has changed considerably over the past few years, with the number of starts decreasing from over 509,000 in 2015/16, to just under

393,500 in 2018/19¹³. Further analysis reveals distinct patterns between apprenticeships at different levels¹⁴. Between 2014/15 and 2018/19, the proportion of apprenticeship starts at Level 2 fell from 60 per cent (298,280 starts) to 37 per cent (143,590 starts). Meanwhile, the proportion of apprenticeship starts at Level 4 and above have increased from four per cent (19,771 starts) in 2014/15 to 19 per cent (75,058 starts) in 2018/19. Table 1 provides breakdown by level of apprenticeship starts since 2016/17. This shows that there has been an increase each year at Levels 4, 5, 6 and 7. Proportionately, Level 5 starts have seen the most modest increases and there has been the largest growth in starts at Level 7, though this has been from a very low base.

Table 1: Apprenticeship starts from 2016/17 to 2018/19

	16/17 Starts (%)	17/18 Starts (%)	18/19 Starts (%)
Level 2	260,650 (53%)	161,390 (43%)	143,590 (37%)
Level 3	197,660 (40%)	166,220 (44%)	174,730 (44%)
Level 4	11,920 (2%)	16,800 (4%)	25,010 (6%)
Level 5	22,960 (5%)	20,480 (6%)	27,570 (7%)
Level 6	1,650 (0.33%)	6,370 (2%)	10,820 (3%)
Level 7	50 (0.01%)	4,500 (1%)	11,660 (3%)
Total higher-level apprenticeships	36,572 (7%)	48,153 (13%)	75,058 (19%)
Overall total	494,890	375,760	393,380

Employers paying the apprenticeship levy were more likely than non-levy payers to take on apprentices at Level 4 and above. In 2018/19, 25 per cent of apprenticeship starts with levy paying employers were at Level 4 or above, in comparison with just 11 per cent of apprenticeship starts with non-levy paying organisations.

Employer motivations

Using the apprenticeship levy

Using the apprenticeship levy was a motivator identified by employers and providers for levy paying employers to offer higher-level apprenticeships. Providers interviewed highlighted that these apprenticeships tend to be more expensive than lower-level apprenticeships, which helps employers to spend their levy. Employers often reported a preference for spending their levy by enrolling their existing staff on apprenticeships (see below section), with Level 4 and above apprenticeships best matching their skills needs.

¹³ All data in this section can be found here: [Apprenticeship and traineeship data](#): April 2020.

¹⁴ A full list of level equivalents can be found on the [Government website](#).

'The apprenticeship levy is there, use it or lose it. So, it may well be a strategy to ensure that money is not wasted.' – Provider

Some providers stated that levy-paying employers are becoming increasingly familiar with the apprenticeship system and there is a shift from a 'use it or lose it' mentality to business-orientated decisions about how best to invest their funds. This shift was partly attributed to an increased availability of higher-level apprenticeship standards which employers could take advantage of to meet a range of business needs, such as recruiting and upskilling staff.

Enrolling existing staff

Providers explained that overall, employers prefer to enrol existing staff, rather than recruit new staff, on to a higher-level apprenticeship. Providers and employers expressed a range of motivations for putting existing employees on higher-level apprenticeships. These related to their individual business needs such as updating staff skills, filling skills gaps and encouraging staff retention by investing in their development. Some employers used higher-level apprenticeships for existing staff to ensure that employees are up to date with the skills needed for their current role. Providers and employers described how certain Level 5 apprenticeships, such as leadership and management, were often used by employers to upskill employees currently managing teams, but who have not been formally trained in management. These types of management-based apprenticeships have provided an opportunity for employers to professionalise management where individuals have progressed based on their specialist skills but would benefit from gaining leadership skills. These findings also indicated that, in some cases, employers were using higher-level apprenticeships to accredit existing management and leadership skills.

Offering progression to employees

Employers and providers reported higher-level apprenticeships being used to progress employees, including those who had previously completed a Level 3 apprenticeship, and to maintain a talent pipeline through to higher levels. The interviews revealed differences in progression routes by sector. In the engineering sector, employers and providers highlighted that more established apprenticeship progression pathways from Level 3 to Level 4 were now extending up to Levels 5, 6 and 7. In this sector more standards were said to have become available and have been mapped on to existing sector qualifications to form a clear progression pathway. Other employers were developing a range of different Level 4 progression opportunities for staff members who have proven to be dedicated and competent in specialist areas such as IT, project management and food manufacturing. This approach to skills development was helpful for employers to meet more niche skills needs and grow their business. For instance, a small employer was motivated to progress a Level 3 construction apprentice to Level 4 project management to enable the company to take on larger contracts.

Some employers and providers reported that larger employers were more able to provide these pathways to higher-level apprenticeships. In contrast, providers and the one SME

interviewed said that SMEs might be less likely to have higher level roles or vacancies to promote staff into and therefore recruit an apprentice for a set role. However, the decisions SMEs take were also influenced by the importance that business leaders placed on apprenticeships within the organisation. For instance, one small employer proactively offered their employees progression opportunities through apprenticeships, from Levels 2 and 3 up to higher levels.

'It'll give them more opportunities. The more qualifications you get the more opportunities you get...that's the way I look at it. That's why I push qualifications...they might not want to be plasterers in five years' time, we might want to go and do some site management ourselves. It's just good to be able to keep learning in a small outfit' – Employer

Recruiting new staff

Most employers and providers interviewed stated that most higher-level apprenticeship opportunities are offered to existing staff members. This was particularly prevalent for apprenticeships at Levels 4 and 5. In some cases, these employees had previously accessed a Level 3 apprenticeship and were progressing to a higher-level programme. However, there were exceptions where employers sought to recruit new starters on to higher-level apprenticeships. These decisions were made in response to an increased availability of standards allowing employers to address key skills shortages in their business. In the research these examples were all at Level 6. This included employers offering an alternative (and additional) intake alongside their graduate scheme at Level 6; a new Level 6 degree-level apprenticeship programme operated by the police; and recruiting Level 6 apprenticeships in areas of skills shortage, such as packaging technology and food technology. Some providers noted a trend towards employing school leavers into higher-level apprenticeships at Levels 4, 5 or 6 as an alternative to a university degree. Employers did not discuss recruiting older apprentices as new starters, for example those seeking to change career.

Barriers experienced by employers and providers

Employers and providers interviewed highlighted a range of barriers that they face in offering and delivering apprenticeships at Level 4 and above.

Managing off-the-job training

Most employers and providers highlighted that both the perception and management of the requirement for apprentices to spend at least 20% of their time in off-the-job training¹⁵ is the biggest barrier to employers offering higher-level apprenticeships. They reported that time out of work by senior staff can impact on company productivity, so managing the cost of releasing these staff was a challenge. These barriers can be particularly challenging in

¹⁵ The funding rules state that an apprenticeship must provide for training that lasts for a minimum duration of 12 months, at least 20% of the apprentice's paid hours, must be spent on off-the-job training and apprentices are required to evidence certain levels of functional skills qualifications: Education and Skills Funding Agency (2019) [Apprenticeship funding rules](#).

organisations such as consultancies where staff time is sold, as well as for smaller employers. Some providers suggested that this barrier is partially related to employers' lack of understanding of how they can manage the minimum 20% off-the-job training element. These providers thought that the barrier could be reduced in some cases by increasing employers' awareness of the types of activities that can be included in this time, such as mentoring, team meetings, new skills development or a project agreed with the employer. Some providers supported this through targeted engagement such as open days, webinars and individual meetings with the prospective apprentice's line manager to convince them of the value, quality and flexibility of off-the-job activities.

Progression pathways

The research found a general preference among employers for existing staff to access higher-level apprenticeships (rather than new recruits at lower levels), as they have proven dedication to the business and ability to develop in a certain role. One barrier to offering higher-level apprenticeships frequently mentioned by providers was a shortage of available progression routes for existing employees, including those who had completed Level 3 apprenticeships. In sectors such as construction, employers and providers reported a divide between lower level trades-based standards and higher-level standards with a management emphasis. In standards such as quantity surveying, site management and project management, progressing from Level 3 to Level 4 involves changing to a management role, which may not be available or meet business needs.

Similarly, some employers and providers described significant gaps between Level 3 and higher-level apprenticeship standards, which prevented them from enrolling existing employees on to higher-level apprenticeships. In some cases, this was a misconception on the part of employers about the need to train someone into a new role through an apprenticeship. For example, within leadership and management apprenticeships, some employers reported being unable to progress employees with potential from Level 3 team leader to the Level 5 operations and department manager standard, as the employee would need a significant amount of work experience, or a promotion to a new role. This was felt to be a particular issue for SMEs. Some providers expressed concern that they may not be able to offer the appropriate progression from operational to strategic roles or the range of work in a role to fit the higher-level apprenticeship standards and pass the End Point Assessment (EPA).

Availability of standards

Apprenticeship reforms, including the introduction of standards, were intended to ensure an employer-led system and new standards are constantly being developed by employers. While the range of higher-level standards are increasing, some providers and employers reported being constrained in some cases by the standards currently available. Employers and providers reported varying 'missing' higher-level apprenticeships which would be useful for their sector. For example, standards which employers felt would be useful for their staff needs included Level 4 warehouse manager, Level 4 customer service, and non-management standards above Level 4 in business administration. Some of the larger

employers interviewed have played a role in developing higher-level standards themselves to address their industry skills gaps. However, other employers preferred to select pre-existing standards.

Providers also highlighted certain standards they felt would be useful for employers to offer to increase participation in higher-level apprenticeships. For example, one provider delivering IT apprenticeships reported a limited range of standards in digital and IT at Levels 6 and 7. Another provider delivering digital apprenticeships highlighted that a Level 5 standard would help enable progression from Levels 4 to 6, which is currently a large jump.

Changes to funding caps

Some providers highlighted that reductions in funding caps for certain standards have negatively impacted their financial stability and ability to deliver higher-level apprenticeships. Standards specifically mentioned include Level 4 associate project management and Level 4 construction technician, as well as Level 6 apprenticeships across a range of occupations, particularly the chartered manager degree-level apprenticeship. One provider reported a round of redundancies due to changing funding caps. The pace of these changes was said to be being particularly difficult for providers to cope with.

'Fees were cut by £5,000 in one fell swoop, overnight, rather than an incremental reduction over four or five years.' – Provider

Some providers said that responding to these funding reductions has negatively impacted their quality of provision. One specialist IT provider expressed concerns that reductions in funding for IT higher-level standards will adversely affect apprentices' learning experiences, as they modify delivery to online learning to save money, but maintained that certain skills, such as coding, need to be taught in a classroom. It should be noted that the research was undertaken prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Delivery of apprenticeships, and attitudes to online methods, may have subsequently changed.

Availability of tutors

Providers often reported challenges in sourcing suitably qualified tutors and assessors at higher levels as they command higher salaries in their respective industries than they do as a tutor. This was an issue reported across a range of industries, including project management, supply chain management, business analysis, engineering, digital and HR.

'Trying to get somebody in off the tools that's probably earning £50,000 a year to come in to teach and drop £20,000 to teach.' – Provider

High quantities of bureaucracy and paperwork associated with apprenticeships was said to have also become time consuming for providers and employers. This was described as a particular barrier for small employers, who may not have the resources to manage

increased levels of administration. One provider suggested that the extent of paperwork is a further deterrent for suitably qualified tutors at Level 4 and above.

‘The bureaucracy behind running apprenticeships is a barrier, both for the university and for the employer, and all of the hoops you have to go through and the documentation and the reports that you need to write for the Institute for Apprenticeships.’ – Provider

Future expected trends

There was a recognisable divide in opinion between employers and providers in response to expected future trends, with employers predicting the expansion of higher-level apprenticeships, but providers displaying more caution. It should be noted that the research was undertaken prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Employer attitudes towards and decision making about apprenticeships may have subsequently changed.

Larger employers commonly predicted that the use of higher-level, and particularly degree-level apprenticeships, will increase as more standards develop that meet their business needs of recruitment, retention, skills development and employee progression. Some employers interviewed had plans to introduce or expand their higher-level apprenticeships offer into a wider range of roles, as more standards became available. One smaller employer had accessed a levy transfer from their local authority and felt that SMEs could benefit from higher-level apprenticeships if they could be made more aware of different funding options.

In contrast, some providers predicted that employer use of higher-level apprenticeships could level out, or decline. One university provider reported experiencing a fall in the number of higher-level apprenticeships as employers experienced difficulties with managing their apprentices’ minimum 20% off-the-job training, providing appropriate levels of supervision and handling the administration. Another provider predicted a decline in the use of apprenticeships in the future across all higher levels as employers run out of existing staff to offer these apprenticeships to. They reported that employers would face difficulties in either recruiting higher-level apprentices or progressing their staff when higher-level apprenticeships required a role change.

“With the standards, it’s not like you can progress someone from a level 3 to a level 5, because they have to have a significant change in their job role. So, if it’s management, they have to move from actually an operational role into a strategic role. Unless they do that, then they can’t progress onto the higher-level qualification. They won’t be able to demonstrate the skills...several years down the line, once all these companies have developed all their staff, what are they then going to do?” - Provider

Another provider suggested that employers would be less willing to use higher-level apprenticeships in their business if it became necessary for them to provide a level of ongoing support.

“Once a learner is on an apprenticeship then the employer will very happily turn their head and say, ‘Right, see you in two years. Okay, enjoy. Bye-bye.’...The minute that it becomes stipulative and rigid then attitudes to apprenticeships will change because it will effect the whole business having to have a focus towards support of those on apprenticeships formally, which, of course, is not core business and as a result of that attitudes would change.” - Provider

Some employers commented that they tend not to receive many external applications for apprentice vacancies at higher levels. They suggested that these opportunities should be promoted more by schools. Employers did not discuss the potential for externally-advertised vacancies to be taken up by older adults, for example those seeking to change career.

Some providers thought that employers will advocate changes in the apprenticeship system to address some of their existing barriers to expanding the use of higher-level apprenticeships. These included opening up the levy to fund other forms of training to support progression to higher-level apprenticeships, reductions in the minimum 20% off-the-job, or more flexibility in the delivery of standards to ensure they can keep pace with advances in their industries.

Profile of apprentices at Level 4 and above

This chapter explores the profile of apprentices undertaking Level 4 and above apprenticeships with analysis of Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data from the academic year 2018/19. It explores how this profile compares with the demographic profile of general higher education students and apprentices on programmes below Level 4.

Key chapter findings

- In 2018/19, 60 per cent of higher-level apprentices were aged 25 and over, although there were large differences between levels. For example, 45 per cent of Level 6 apprentices were aged 25 and over, compared with 76 per cent of apprentices on Level 5 programmes. In comparison, just over a fifth (22 per cent) of first year undergraduates and 52 per cent of first year postgraduates were aged 25 and above.
- Higher-level apprentices were more likely to be on programmes above their previous qualification level than those on lower-level apprenticeships. Just 17 per cent of apprentices at Levels 4 and 5 had already completed a qualification at the same level or above. In comparison, 51 per cent of Level 2 apprentices and 27 per cent of Level 3 apprentices held a qualification at the same level, or higher, than their apprenticeship.
- Level 6 apprenticeships had the lowest female participation rate of 43 per cent and Level 5 had the highest female participation rate, at 61 per cent. This reflects the high proportion of health, public services and care sector apprenticeships at Level 5, where women are overrepresented. In the academic year 2018/19, the majority of first year undergraduates (57 per cent) and postgraduates (60 per cent) were women.
- There were slightly higher proportions of apprentices from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds on higher-level apprenticeships (16 per cent) than lower level programmes (13 per cent). In contrast, 30 per cent of first year undergraduates and 27 per cent of first year postgraduates were from BAME backgrounds.
- Only eight per cent of apprentices on Level 4+ programmes declared a learning difficulty or disability (LDD); lower than apprentices at Level 2 (13 per cent) and Level 3 (10 per cent). This was also lower than in higher education (14 per cent of undergraduates and nine per cent of postgraduates).
- London had the highest proportion of apprentices at Level 4 and above, with 29 per cent of London apprentices on higher-level programmes. Yorkshire and the Humber and the South West had the lowest proportions of higher-level apprentices, with just over one-fifth (21 per cent) of apprentices at Level 4 and above in 2018/19.
- Apprentices on higher level apprenticeships account for 30 per cent of all apprentices living in the most affluent areas, in comparison to just 18 per cent of apprentices from the most deprived areas.

Analysis of apprenticeship participation data

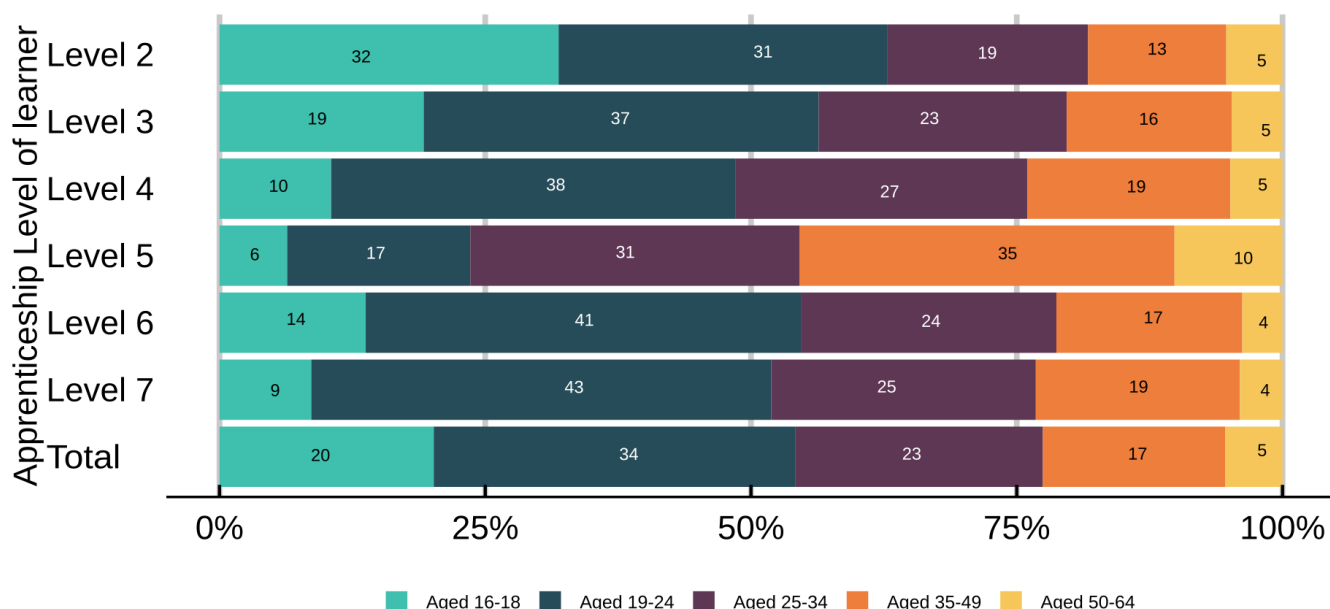
The research included analysis of ILR data to better understand the demographic characteristics of apprentices in the academic year 2018/19. There were 509,649 unique individuals identified as participating in apprenticeship programmes during the academic year 2018/19. Of these, 23 per cent (119,346) were on programmes at Level 4 and above.

The data was compared with the profile of apprentices on programmes below Level 4, as well as the profile of first year students on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The analysis explores differences by age, level of prior qualification, gender, ethnicity, LDD and geography. All differences noted in the text are statistically significant.

Age

In 2018/19, 54 per cent of apprentices were aged 16-24 and 46 per cent of apprentices were aged 25 and above. Looking at apprentices at Level 4 and above only, the age profile is older with 60 per cent of apprentices aged 25 or over (Figure 1). However, there are significant differences across these levels. Just over three quarters (76 per cent) of apprentices on Level 5 programmes were aged 25 and over, compared to 45 per cent of apprentices at Level 6, 48 per cent at Level 7 and 51 per cent of apprentices at Level 4. The age profiles of apprentices at Levels 6 and 7 are similar to apprentices at Level 3, where 44 per cent of apprentices were aged 25 and over. The age profile of Level 2 apprentices is lower than other levels, with nearly two thirds (63 per cent) aged 16-24 and 37 per cent aged 25 or over.

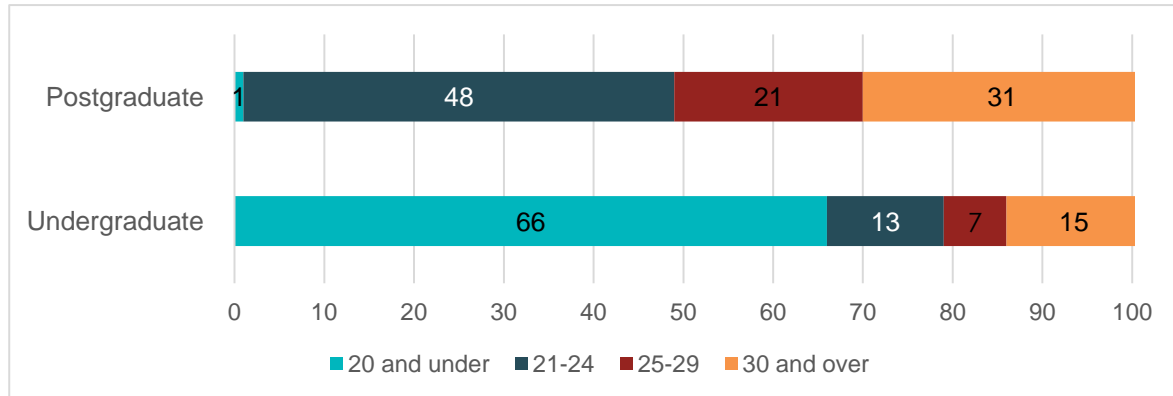
Figure 1: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by age group and level



HE students tended to be younger overall compared to higher-level apprentices. HESA data shows that just over a fifth (22 per cent) of first year undergraduate students in

2018/19 were aged 25 and above (Figure 2) while two thirds (66 per cent) were aged 20 years old or younger. Looking at first year postgraduate students in the same academic year, just over half (52 per cent) were aged 25 or over – similar to apprentices at Level 4.

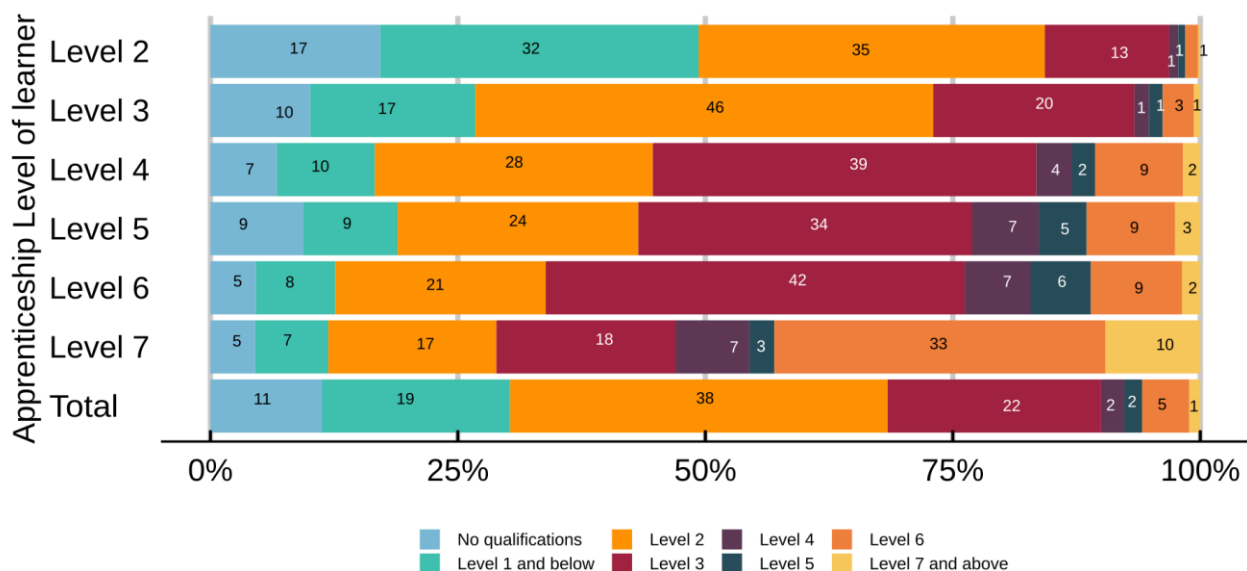
Figure 2: HE undergraduate and postgraduate starts 2018/19, by age group



Level of prior qualification

In 2018/19, most apprentices were on a programme above their level of existing qualification (Figure 3). The proportions of apprentices undertaking a programme on or below their existing level of qualification decreases as the levels increase. For example, 51 per cent of Level 2 apprentices already had a qualification at Level 2 or above compared to 26 per cent of Level 3 apprentices with a qualification at Level 3 or above. Nevertheless, one in 10 apprentices on a Level 7 programme already held qualifications at this level or above.

Figure 3: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by level of prior qualification and level

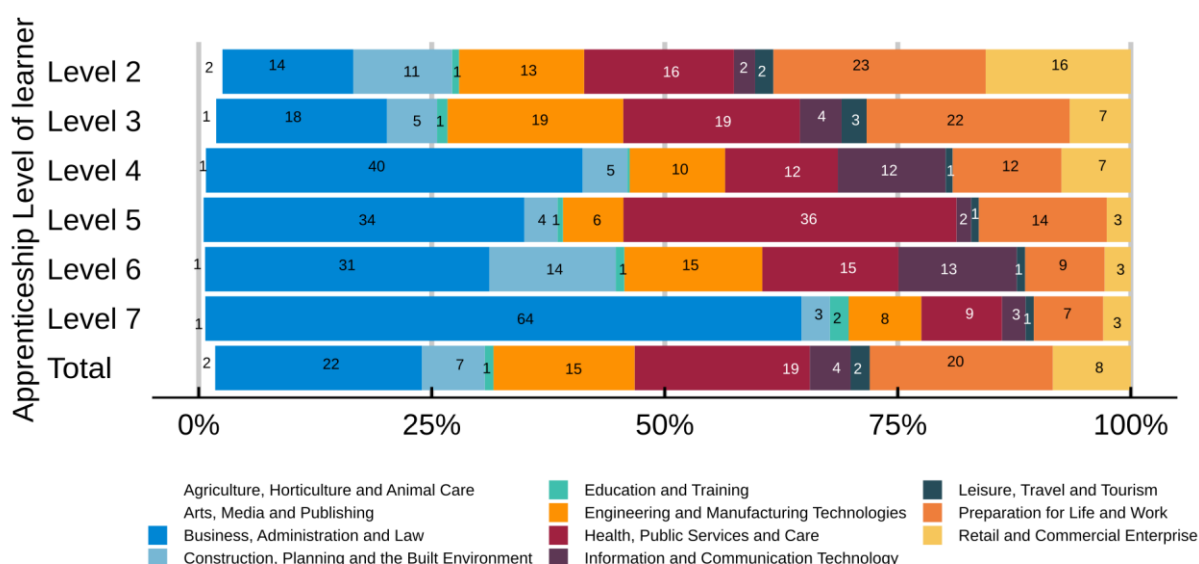


Sector subject area

The data shows differences in apprenticeship levels across sector subject areas (Figure 4). Overall, apprentices at Levels 2 and 3 were more evenly spread across sectors and higher-level apprenticeships were more concentrated in certain sectors.

Most notably, at Level 7, nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of apprentices were on programmes related to business, administration and law, compared to 22 per cent overall. Over one third (36 per cent) of apprentices on Level 5 programmes were in health, public services and care, compared to 19 per cent overall. While information and communication technology apprentices represent just four per cent of total apprentices, this proportion was higher at Level 4 (12 per cent) and Level 6 (13 per cent). Similarly, apprenticeships in construction, planning and the built environment made up only seven per cent of all participation, but they made up 14 per cent of participation at Level 4.

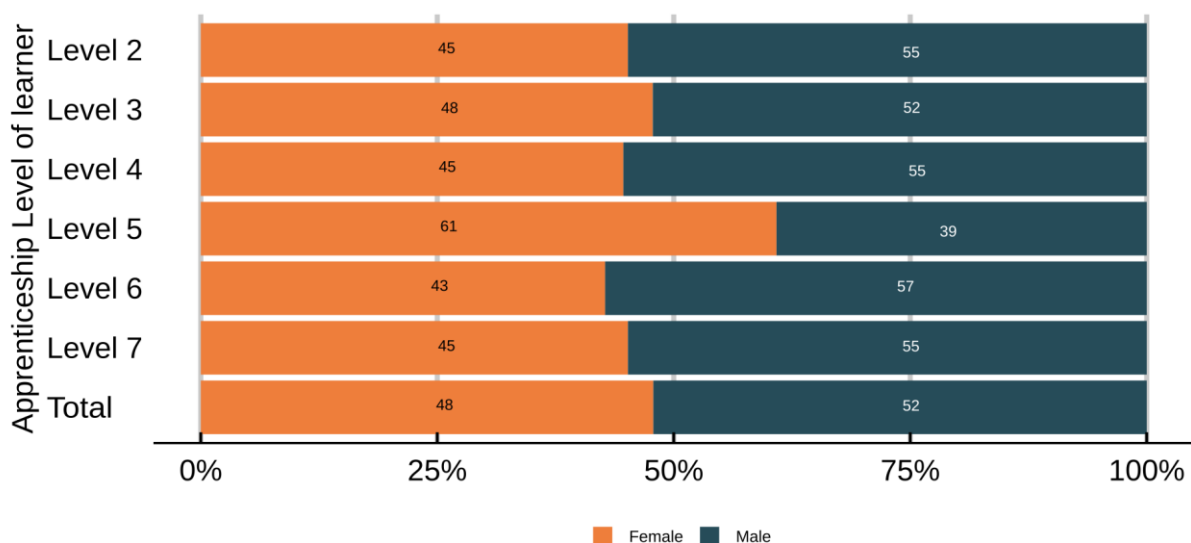
Figure 4: Apprenticeship participation by sector subject area and level



Gender

Nearly half (48 per cent) of apprentices in the academic year 2018/19 were women and just over half (52 per cent) were men (Figure 5). However, there were large differences between Level 5 apprenticeships and the other levels. Women were more likely than men to take up an apprenticeship at Level 5, which had 61 per cent representation from women and 39 per cent from men. Level 6 apprenticeships had the lowest female participation of all levels (43 per cent). The gender split is affected by gender disparity within sector subject area. Just over two thirds (68 per cent) of higher-level apprenticeships in health, public services and care are by women, and 36 per cent of Level 5 apprenticeships are in that sector (as shown in Figure 4 above).

Figure 5: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by gender and level



Figures 6 and 7 explore differences in sector subject area participation by gender and apprenticeship level. These show that women were more likely than men to be undertaking a health, public services and care sector apprenticeship. 29 per cent of female apprentices were in this sector, in comparison to 10 per cent of male apprentices. There are also notable differences between men and women in engineering and manufacturing technologies. Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of all male apprentices were on programmes in this sector area in comparison to only five per cent of all female apprentices. Similarly, just two per cent of female apprentices were in the construction sector, in comparison to 11 per cent of male apprentices.

Figure 6: Women: apprenticeship participation by Sector Subject Area and level

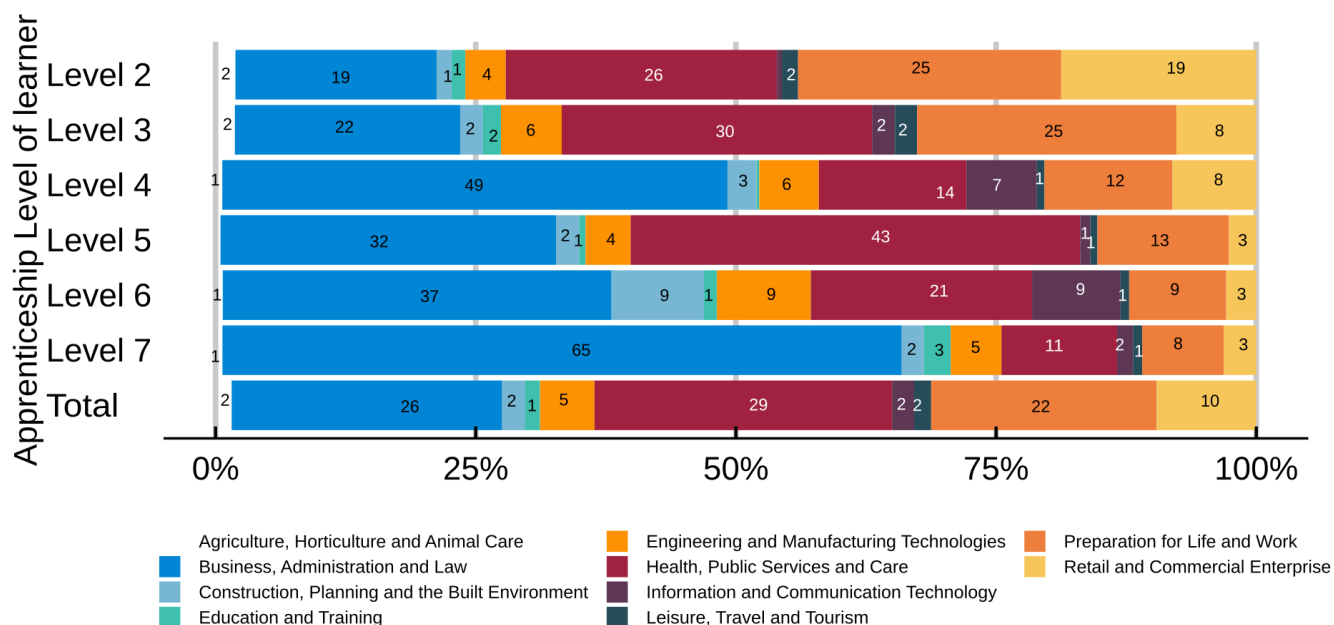
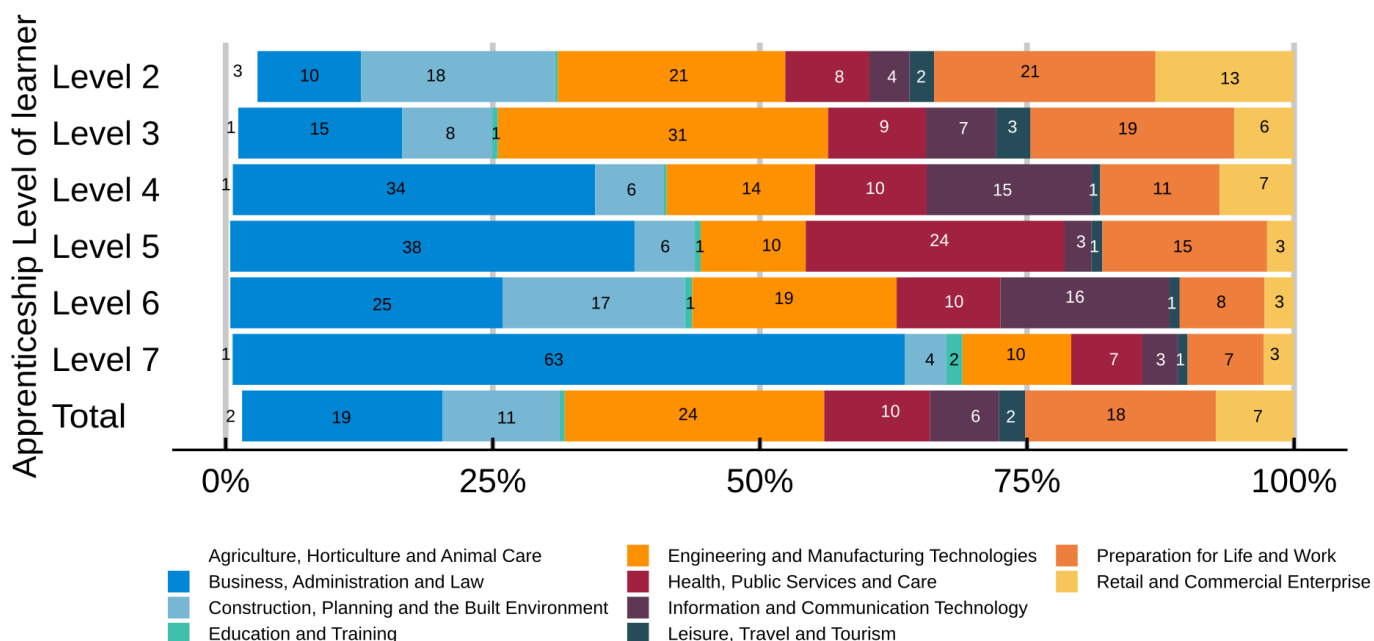
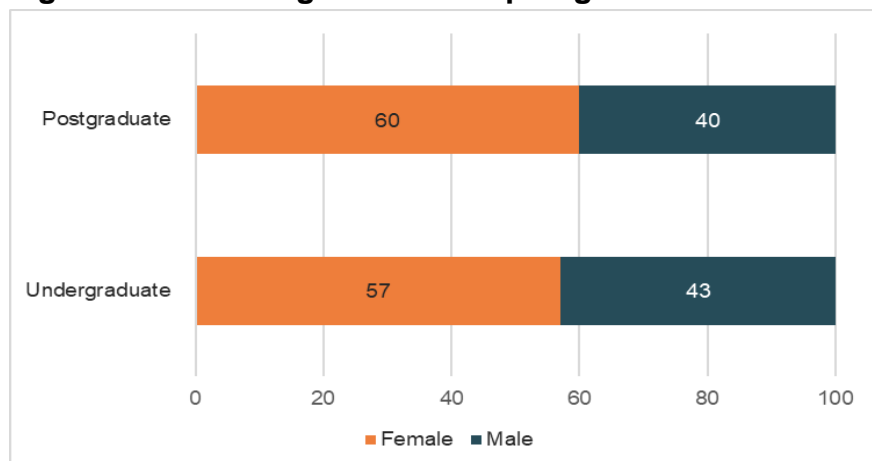


Figure 7: Men: apprenticeship participation by Sector Subject Area and level



In contrast to apprenticeships, where there was a higher proportion of men at most levels, 2018/19 HESA data showed a higher proportion of women started a higher education programme. In the academic year 2018/19, women represented 57 per cent of undergraduates and 60 per cent of postgraduates (Figure 6).

Figure 8: HE undergraduate and postgraduate starts 2018/19, by gender



Interviewees highlighted that women, particularly those over 25, may be more likely to be primarily responsible for childcare or other caring responsibilities and are more likely than men to be single parents. Caring responsibilities were stated as a potential barrier to accessing higher-level apprenticeships, which could also account for underrepresentation of women in higher-level apprenticeships in comparison to younger women in higher education.

'There's some people on my course who've got a family and they're struggling a lot more with it... I do think it cuts out some people from the option of doing it.' - Apprentice, Level 7

Interviewees said that the main differences regarding gender were at the sector level. Providers highlighted that certain sectors such as healthcare tend to be female dominated, whereas women are underrepresented in sectors viewed as traditionally 'male orientated' such as engineering, manufacturing, ICT and construction. This is reflected in Figures 6 and 7. Several employers highlighted a promotional push to recruit more women into STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) sector roles, but that this was an ongoing issue at all levels.

'All of our engineers are men... we really always want to be proactive and have female engineers, but they're just not available to recruit.' - Employer

Some employers acknowledged that those accessing managerial apprenticeship standards reflected organisational gender differences among senior management. In contrast, other higher-level occupational standards, such as Level 4 or Level 6 project management, were often reported as predominantly female. Therefore, depending on the types of standards offered, females could be under, or over, represented at higher-level apprenticeships within any individual organisation.

Ethnicity

In 2018/19, 86 per cent of apprentices were from White backgrounds. People from BAME backgrounds comprised 14 per cent of apprentices, including five per cent from Asian backgrounds, four per cent from Black backgrounds, three per cent from Mixed Backgrounds and two per cent from Other backgrounds. When compared to the working age population (15 per cent¹⁶), people from BAME backgrounds are underrepresented in apprenticeships.

As can be seen in Figure 9, there are slightly higher proportions of people from BAME backgrounds undertaking apprenticeships at Level 4 and above, in comparison to Levels 2 and 3.

Individuals from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds were more likely to be on an apprenticeship at Level 7 than any other level of apprenticeship. The highest proportion of participation at Level 7 were by people from Asian or Other backgrounds. Apprentices from Black backgrounds were more likely to be undertaking programmes at Level 5.

¹⁶ This Figure is from the 2011 census, leading to the possibility of demographic change in the intervening period. However, the 2019 Annual Population Survey shows a similar proportion of BAME individuals in the working age population to the census: 14.7% compared with 14.9%; therefore, it is unlikely that demographic change would be large enough to affect conclusions.

These patterns can be seen more clearly in Figure 10, which presents the same data by level, with the percentages calculated as a proportion of each ethnic group. This shows that 13 per cent of apprentices from Black backgrounds were on a Level 5 programme – exceeded only by people from Other ethnic background at 14 per cent. The data shows that apprentices from Asian backgrounds starting a higher-level apprenticeship were more likely than apprentices from any other background to be on a Level 7 programme.

Figure 9: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by ethnicity and level

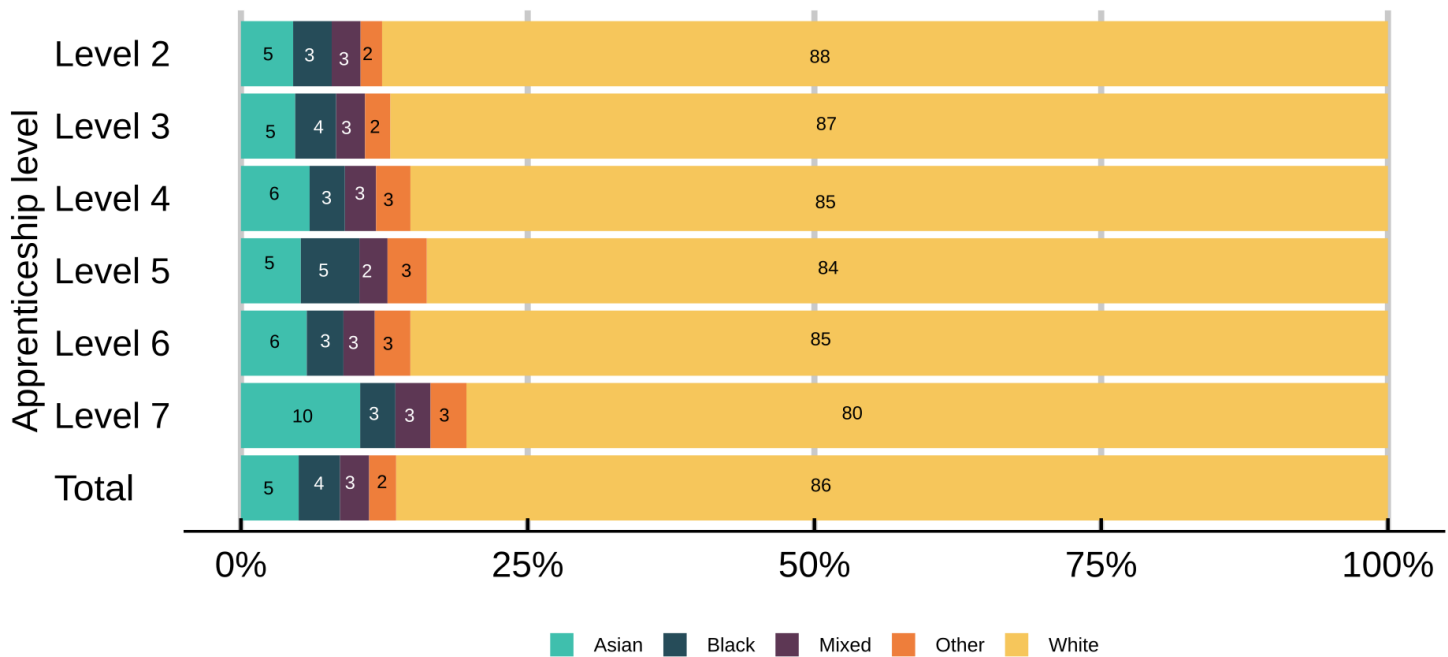
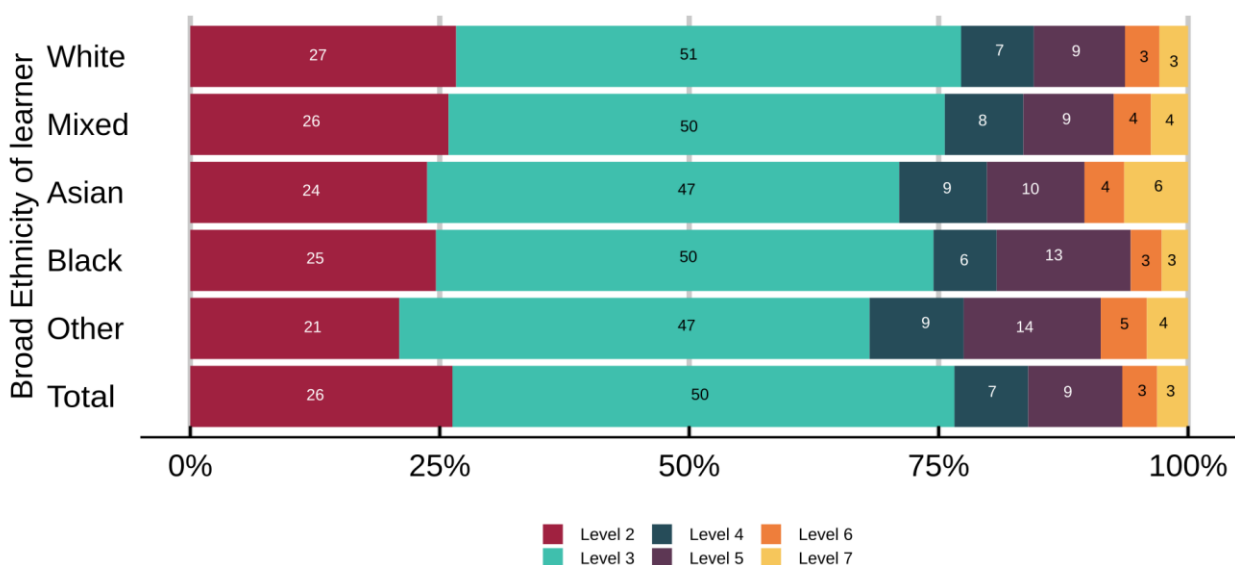


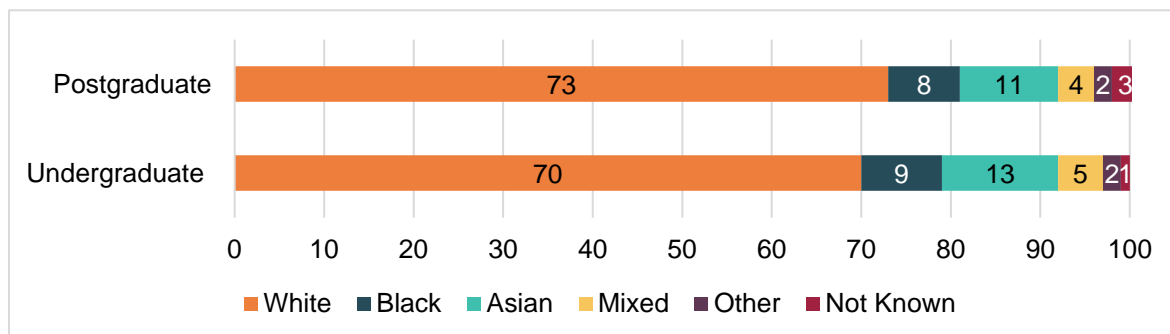
Figure 10: Ethnicity of apprentices by level



HESA data from 2018/19 shows better representation from people from BAME

backgrounds (Figure 11). In 2018/19, 70 per cent of first year undergraduate students and 73 per cent of first year postgraduate students were from White backgrounds. People from Asian backgrounds accounted for 13 per cent of first year undergraduates and 11 per cent of first year postgraduates. People from Black backgrounds accounted for nine per cent and eight per cent of undergraduate and postgraduate students respectively.

Figure 11: HE undergraduate and postgraduate starts 2018/19, by ethnicity



Interviewees highlighted that the diversity of a local population was a factor in the representation of people from BAME backgrounds in higher-level apprenticeships. Some employers and apprentices reported their workforce diversity across different sites broadly reflects the local population within certain areas.

Some providers and employers thought that the sector is more of an influence on characteristics of apprentices than the level of apprenticeship. Providers and employers highlighted sectors with an overrepresentation of people from BAME backgrounds and linked this to the traditional cultural acceptability of certain occupations. For example, a provider delivering digital degree-level apprenticeships reported that half of their intake was from BAME backgrounds, predominantly Asian. In contrast, most of their construction sector higher-level apprenticeships were White, despite operating in a diverse area.

'I would suggest...in some sectors of the community...construction is seen as being a bit of a poor relative or not such a white-collar job.' - Provider

While cultural expectations offer a partial explanation, respondents said that sectors where people from BAME backgrounds are underrepresented often recruit in a way which replicates this, and underrepresentation acts as a deterrent for potential apprentices.

'That particular sector [construction] carries with it significant biases, and so apprenticeships don't reach out to different sectors of society.' - Provider

'For whatever reason we don't receive the applications from those groups, but that is representative of the business and the industry...we do have a diversity issue.' - Employer

The ILR data supports these views to some extent, as shown in Figures 12 and 13. Participation by people from BAME backgrounds in information and communications technology apprenticeships at Levels 4 and 6 was (at 15 and 16 per cent respectively), higher than for the 11 per cent and 12 per cent from White backgrounds. In the

construction and engineering sectors there were smaller proportions of BAME apprentices than White apprentices at all levels. There were particular differences within the construction sector at Level 3, where the proportion of people from BAME backgrounds was 12 per cent, in comparison to 20 per cent of people from White backgrounds. However, differences in participation in the engineering and construction sectors decreased as the level increased narrowed to one to two per cent at Levels 4, 5 and 7. Apprentices in health, public services and care sector across were more likely to be from BAME rather than White backgrounds all levels, except Level 4.

Figure 12: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by Sector Skills Area and Level, for apprentices from BAME backgrounds

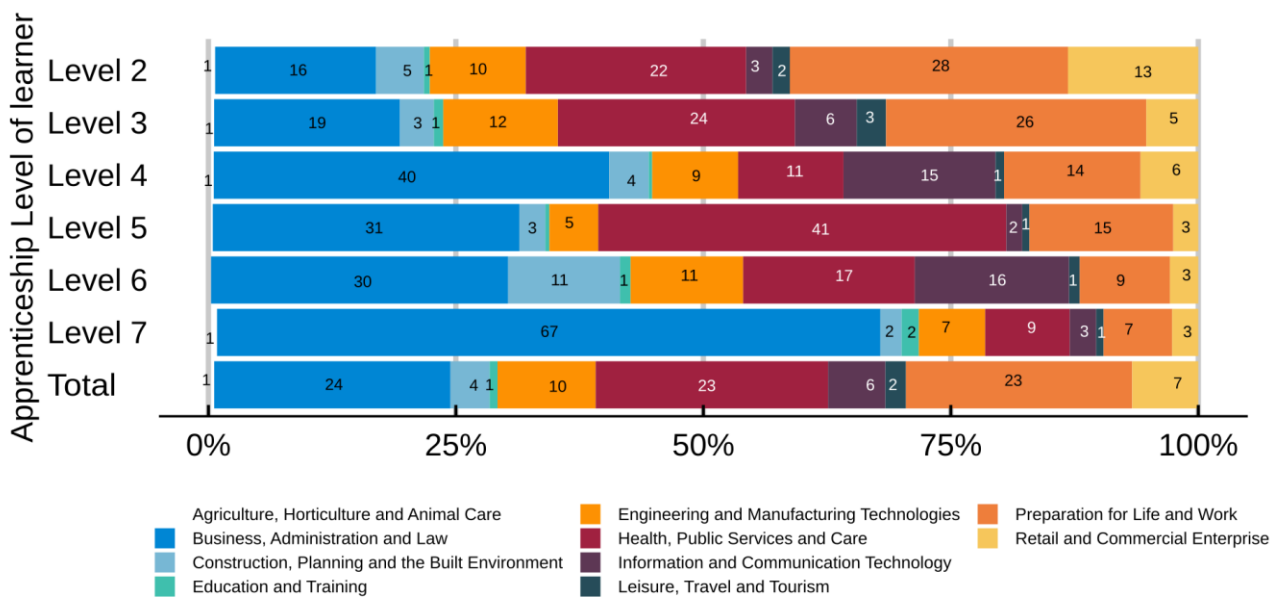
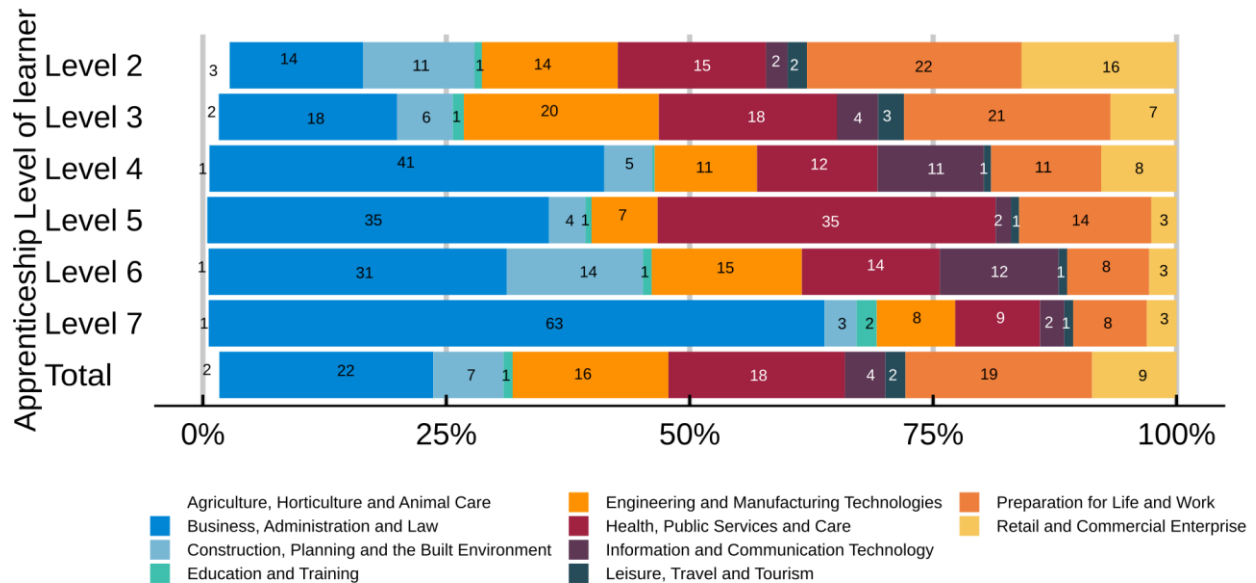


Figure 13: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by Sector Skills Area and Level, for apprentices from White backgrounds



Learning difficulty or disability

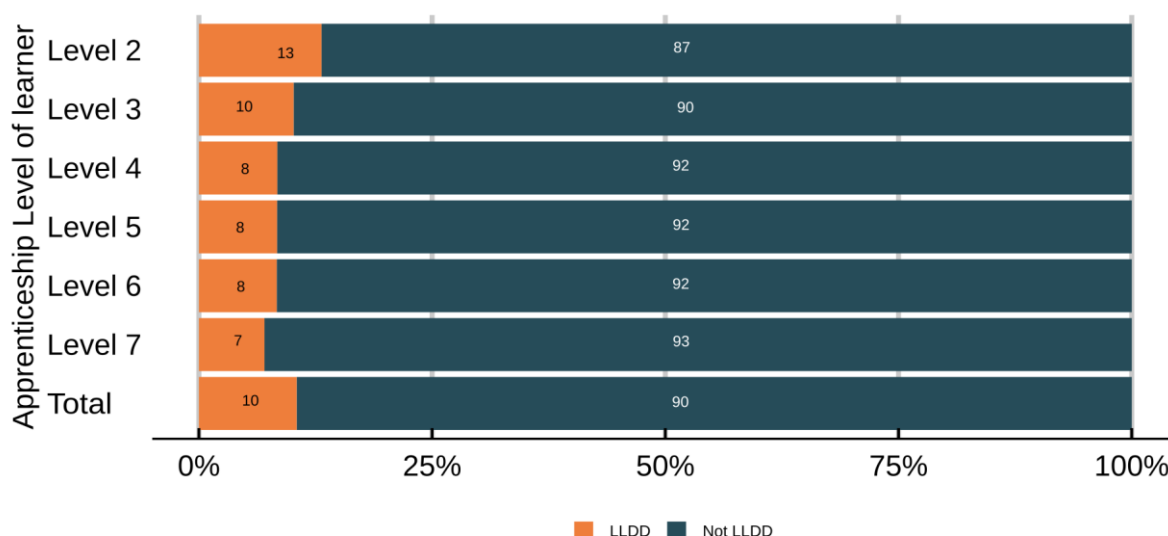
In 2018/19, 10 per cent of apprentices declared a learning difficulty or disability (LDD). Apprentices with an LDD were more likely to be on lower level programmes. When compared to the working age population (18 per cent¹⁷), people with a declared LDD are underrepresented in apprenticeships.

Figure 14 shows that a smaller proportion (eight per cent) of apprentices on programmes at Level 4 and above were by people with an LDD¹⁸. Only seven per cent of apprentices at Level 7 declared an LDD.

¹⁷ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7540/> (18 per cent Figure refers to section 2.2, which states that 18 per cent of the UK working population have a specific or severe learning difficulty)

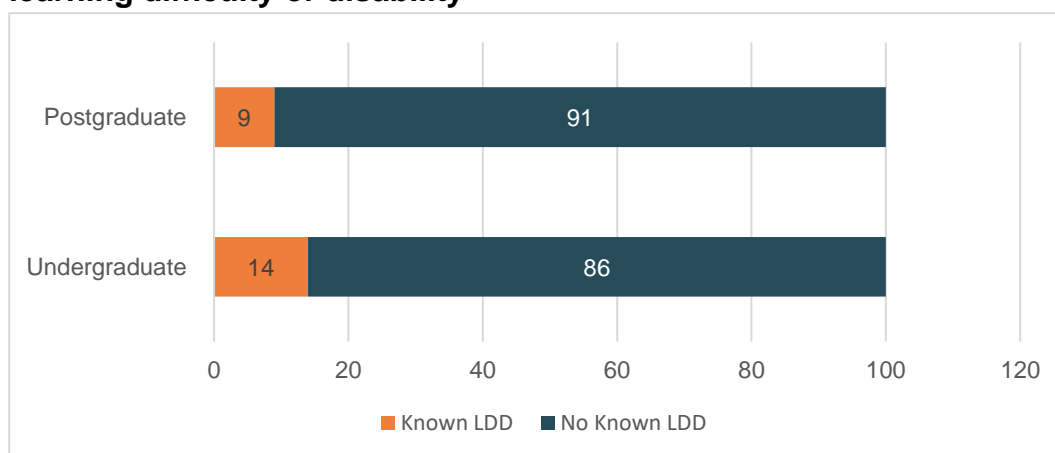
¹⁸The numbers in specific categories are small with the exception of Dyslexia and “Other medical condition (for example epilepsy, asthma, diabetes)”. Detailed analysis has not been included as it could be disclosive.

Figure 14: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by learning difficulty or disability and level



In comparison, 14 per cent of first year higher education undergraduates declared an LDD. This was slightly lower for postgraduates, at nine per cent.

Figure 15: HE undergraduate and postgraduate participation 2018/19, by declared learning difficulty or disability



Employers highlighted issues with recruiting individuals with LDDs in their sectors generally. Some employers only had experience of individuals with LDD accessing lower level apprenticeships.

The size of an organisation is one indicator of whether they feel able to support individuals with LDD to access higher-level apprenticeships. A small employer explained that a Level 3 apprentice is likely to be 'held back' from progressing from their current role as a plasterer unless they can access additional dyslexia support from the provider.

'One of our apprentices, he would want to do the Level 4, but his dyslexia might hold him back and that would be a shame if we can't get more support for him to do it.' - Employer

In contrast, some of the larger employers and providers interviewed were confident in their ability to support and provide reasonable adjustments for individuals with LDD. For instance, a university provider described a strong support system for students with dyslexia and a large employer had trained managers to work with providers to support individuals' additional support needs, including autism and dyslexia. Apprentices with dyslexia reported that their initial concerns had been overcome by receiving reassurance from their providers and employers about the support they would receive with study skills.

'We don't say you can't. It's a case of, you need to tell us soon so that we can make adjustments for you and give you additional support.' – Employer

Finally, the recruitment and assessment process for a higher-level apprenticeship could present barriers for some people with LDD. One employer in the IT industry runs a two-day assessment centre to recruit staff and focusses on individual strengths rather than performance in a group task to ensure this is accessible for candidates with autism.

'There are people who have come through our assessment centre who are autistic. In the group exercises, they don't do very well... but that's okay because I ignore that assessment side of their abilities. I assess them on their technical abilities, the ability to take instructions on board and follow those instructions, and they're very strong. We've recruited two of them for our next group of apprentices.' – Employer

Geography

Figure 16 shows the proportion of apprenticeship participation by region based on the apprentice's home postcode. These patterns are significantly different by apprenticeship level, and this variation across regions is likely to reflect the local labour markets.

Overall, London had the highest proportion of higher-level apprenticeships, with 29 per cent of London apprentices on Level 4 or above programmes. The East of England had the next highest proportion of apprentices on higher level programmes, accounting for a quarter of apprentices (25 per cent). Yorkshire and the Humber and the South West had the lowest proportions of higher-level apprentices, at 21 per cent.

Within the higher-level apprenticeships, participation in Level 5 and 6 apprenticeships was relatively evenly spread between regions. There were some notable differences in the regional participation of Level 4 and 7 apprenticeships. London had the highest proportion of participation at these levels (10 per cent of London based apprentices were at Level 4 and 10 per cent at Level 7). In comparison, South West and Yorkshire and the Humber had comparatively lower participation at these levels, with 6 per cent of apprentices at Level 4 and 3 per cent at Level 7.

Yorkshire and the Humber had the highest proportion of apprentices at Level 2, with 31 per cent of apprentices at this level, in comparison to London, which had the lowest at 21 per cent. The South West had the highest proportion of apprentices at Level 3, at 52 per cent.

Figure 16: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by region and level

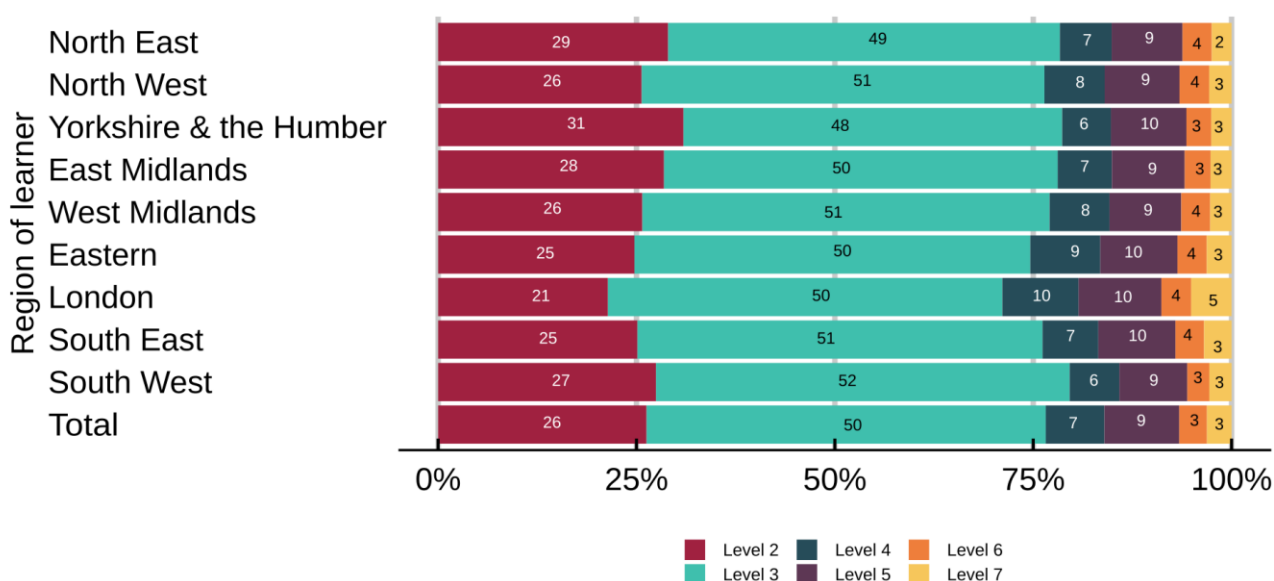


Figure 17 shows apprenticeship participation by Index of Multiple of Deprivation (IMD). Apprenticeship participation in the most deprived areas was more concentrated at Levels 2 and 3. Apprentices on higher-level (Level 4+) apprenticeships accounted for 30 per cent of all apprentices in the most affluent areas, in comparison to just 18 per cent of apprentices from the most deprived areas. While there were slight increases in the proportion of apprentices at all higher levels in the most affluent areas, the largest differences were seen at Levels 4 and 7. In the most deprived areas, just five per cent of apprentices were on Level 4 programmes and two per cent were on Level 7 programmes. This increased to nine per cent on Level 4 and five per cent on Level 7 in the most affluent areas. This suggests that these differences are linked to the supply of opportunities, rather than only reflecting average levels of qualification across areas.

Figure 18 shows that the largest proportions of first year undergraduates are in the two least deprived quintiles, with the least deprived quintile accounting for almost a quarter (24 per cent) of the total. However, overall, the spread of participation in HE across the five recorded deciles of IMD is more evenly spread for undergraduates in comparison to higher-level apprenticeships.

Figure 37: Apprenticeship participation 2018/19, by Index of Multiple Deprivation and apprenticeship level

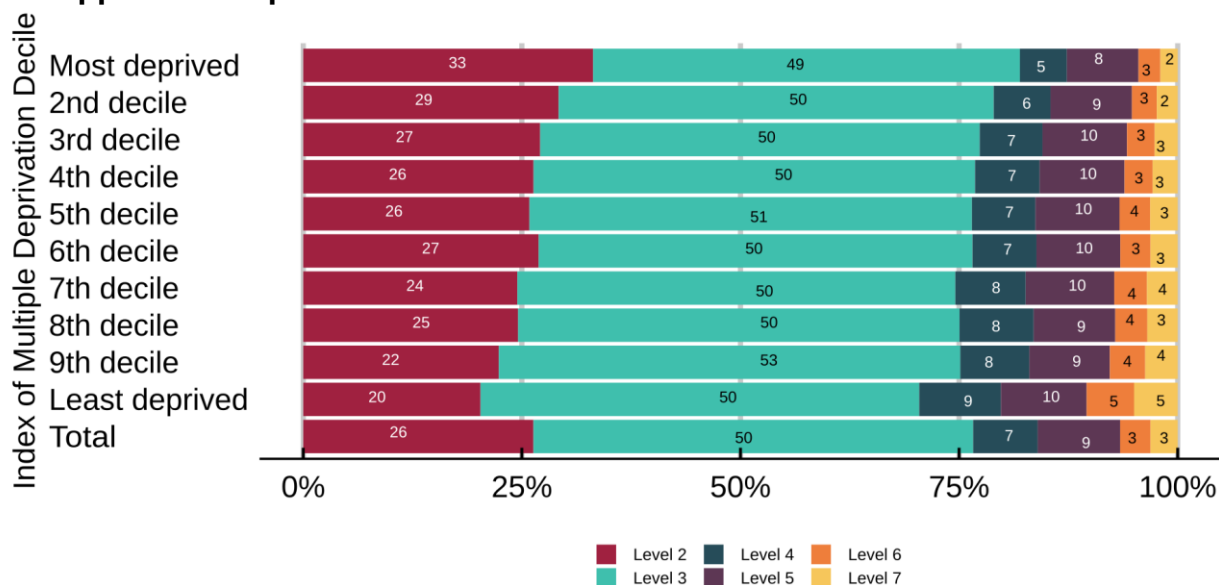
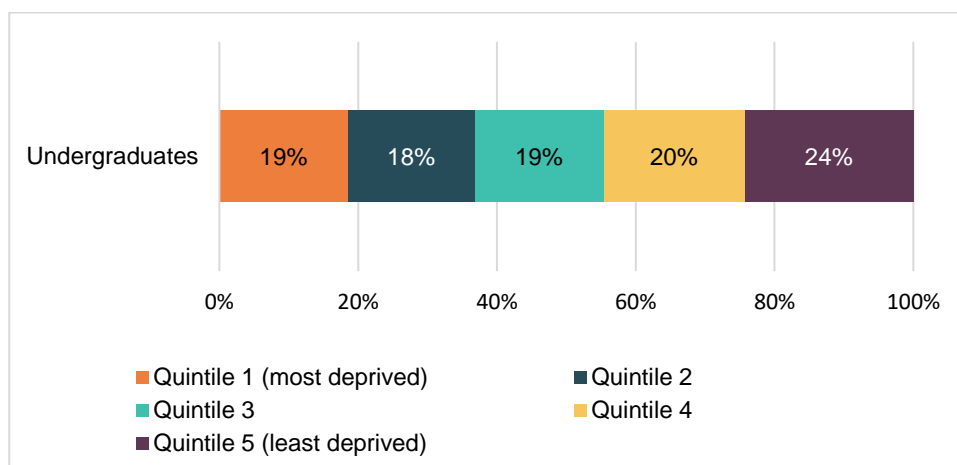


Figure 18: HE undergraduate participation 2018/19, by Index of Multiple Deprivation



Employers interviewed often explained that they did not track the proportions of their staff from disadvantaged areas, therefore they were unaware of their participation in apprenticeships. Some providers highlighted that employers may not prioritise this issue unless it forms part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agenda, and/or they are based in deprived areas. Therefore, smaller employers without a CSR agenda, or those in more affluent areas were less likely to proactively address the barriers people from deprived areas may encounter.

Most providers felt that higher-level apprenticeships should appeal to those in more deprived areas as they enable people to access a career with progression prospects without self-financing a degree. However, providers who offered degree-level apprenticeships often commented that their Level 6 apprenticeship candidates tended to live in more affluent areas. This finding is confirmed by in the ILR analysis (Figure 17).

This may reflect the profile of staff who employers select for apprenticeships, who may be at senior levels within the organisation, with higher salaries. One employer with sites in deprived areas reported that their local candidates tend to access apprenticeships at Levels 2 or 3, reflecting the lower qualification levels in these areas.

Other barriers cited include transport, which can limit the ability to travel to higher-level opportunities if they are not available locally. Some apprentices highlighted that an apprenticeship wage may not cover the costs of commuting or moving to areas where these opportunities are available, which presents a barrier for those without financial support from their families or savings. In comparison, relocating for higher education tends to be more temporary, with financial support from student loans.

'If you are not near it and you've not got a way of getting to that place and if you can't afford the yearly train ticket or whatever, then you're not going to be able to do it. You don't get a loan like a student loan does for university' - Apprentice, Level 6

Apprentice pay, and perceptions of this always being low paid, was also described as a barrier. Individuals from disadvantaged areas could be less likely to risk accessing an opportunity paying the apprentice minimum wage in the shorter term.

Finally, one provider highlighted that the higher-level apprenticeship route is less established, and people from disadvantaged areas may require additional support if they do not have sufficient support in their immediate network.

'People who've got strong ambition, strong cultural and social capital around them, strong networks, who are supported and given the confidence to go out and do this, are going to succeed. People who don't have that have got a real mountain to climb in terms of getting the job in the first place.' – Provider

Apprentice experiences

This chapter reviews apprentice motivations and barriers to undertaking higher level apprenticeships. It also explores the factors which made a difference to their experiences and ability to complete their higher-level apprenticeship, and their suggestions for improvement.

Key chapter findings

- The main motivations given by interviewees for starting a higher-level apprenticeship include: enhancing career progression and personal development; gaining the equivalent benefits of a high-level qualification with minimal impact on personal time and finances; and accessing work-based learning.
- Apprentices who were already employees prior to starting their programme highlighted that their main barrier to undertaking an apprenticeship was their current workload. Those with caring responsibilities felt that it was only viable to undertake an apprenticeship if it could be completed within the working week (as it should be as part of their minimum 20% off-the-job training).
- Other barriers to accessing higher-level apprenticeships cited by apprentices included low awareness; a lack of study skills; and stigma or lack of status of apprenticeships.
- The main suggestions to improve access to higher-level apprenticeships included increasing promotion of these opportunities and reducing negative perceptions of apprenticeships. Information viewed as critical to address these perceptions included: the range of opportunities available; pay rates for apprentices; the value of apprenticeships to employers; and the on-programme support offered.
- To increase the number of apprentices from underrepresented groups, interviewees suggested targeted awareness raising; financial support for apprentices at the start of their programme; resources to help employers engage with a more diverse workforce; and the promotion of pathways to higher-level apprenticeships.
- Suggestions to improve apprentices' on-programme experiences included clear discussions at the beginning of the programme about the level of commitment to be expected of both the apprentice and employer; study support from providers; protected time for off-the-job training; and support from colleagues in the workplace.
- Regular tripartite meetings between the employer, provider and apprentice were highlighted as key to ensuring any issues were addressed in a timely way.

Apprentice motivations

Gaining occupational experience while learning

Those who joined their organisation as higher-level apprentices were keen to learn on the job, rather than through the theoretical and classroom-based learning they expected from a traditional university course. Most of these new starters had recently completed Level 3 qualifications such as A-Levels before starting their higher-level apprenticeship at Level 4 or 6. They were generally younger and at an earlier stage in their career, than those who had been existing staff. These early career apprentices said that undertaking an apprenticeship role enhanced their employment prospects in comparison to university courses.

'When you come out of uni, you're at the same level as everyone else, whereas when I finish my [degree-level apprenticeship], I've got four years' work experience over people who have been to uni and haven't done an apprenticeship.' - Apprentice, Level 6

'I couldn't have got this job because I had no real experience. Apprenticeships as a tool to get your foot in the door is perfect.' - Apprentice, Level 4

Apprentices in certain professional sectors, such as architecture and engineering, highlighted that apprenticeships at Levels 6 and 7 offered the opportunity to build a track record of experience and/or gain accreditation. For example, the Master of Architecture at Level 7 includes the qualification required in order to become a chartered architect. The work experience gained on an apprenticeship programme enabled these apprentices to realise these professional achievements earlier in their careers than those who pursued a traditional university degree course.

Career progression

Apprentices who were already working for their employer when they started their higher-level apprenticeship often reported being driven by a desire to upskill, broaden their skillset and progress their careers. Some apprentices and employers described their workplaces as having an established progression route through apprenticeships. These employers clearly mapped apprenticeship levels on to job roles and levels, so that employees could be confident of the opportunity for promotion on completion.

'My initial thought when I started working in a hospital, was that I would like to be a band five nurse. I need to do [a Level 5 qualification] in order to get there...so I was glad when I had an opportunity and they told me, 'you can still work and study' – Apprentice, Level 5

'It was the qualification, pushing myself to get the certificate... to be able to look towards doing other apprenticeships so that's why I did the Level 3 and then the Level 4, and hopefully, I'll do the Level 5.' - Apprentice, Level 4

Employers highlighted that some existing staff accessing higher-level apprenticeships were motivated by a change of role. This was most noted by those working in the

construction sector, where higher-level apprenticeships were in management roles and project management rather than construction trades.

Apprentices who had moved into a management role explained that their apprenticeship offered them the opportunity to become more knowledgeable and competent in their role. This included apprentices who were not new to the leadership role but were keen to access opportunities to improve their management skills. These apprentices were studying at a range of levels, including Levels 4, 5 and 7.

Limiting impact on personal finances or time

Of the apprentices interviewed, those who were employed at their organisation prior to starting their programme were more likely to have caring responsibilities than those who were new to the organisation (who tend to be younger). These caring responsibilities influenced their motivations for taking up an apprenticeship. They reported that the apprenticeship enabled them to learn with minimal impact on their personal time or finances in comparison with non-apprenticeship training pathways. This was particularly important for single parents who were the sole income earner, as it allowed them to continue to earn an income and have enough time outside of the working week to spend with their children.

‘With two little children, being a single parent, I don’t have any other choices...financially, and time as well, so my employer gives me the time to do this in, within my working week’
– Apprentice, Level 5

Those who joined their organisation as an apprentice also highlighted financial benefits to undertaking an apprenticeship in comparison to attending university. They explained that an apprenticeship allowed them to earn while learning and avoid university tuition fees and associated student debt. Some young apprentices who had just completed A-levels and were unsure of their career pathway, felt that an apprenticeship represented less of a personal risk than university.

‘The financial part of it is definitely a massive benefit. Getting paid and university being paid for.’ - Apprentice, Level 6

The minimum 20% off-the-job requirement, which allowed apprentices to complete their programme during working hours over the duration of their apprenticeship, appealed to all apprentices who were employed at their organisation prior to starting their programme. They appreciated being able to continue a full-time job and access learning. The alternative of taking up a higher-level college or part-time university course was more difficult to fit around a full-time job because this protected time for learning was unlikely to be provided by their employer. An apprenticeship also enabled them to continue working and earning during their training.

Preference for work-based learning

Some apprentices described their preference for predominantly work-based rather than classroom-based learning as a main motivation for undertaking an apprenticeship. Some apprentices, including those with dyslexia or other learning difficulties, had not considered accessing higher-level training before because they did not expect to cope well in an academic learning environment. For these individuals, apprenticeships were perceived to offer a more informal and supportive learning environment. This motivation was more prevalent among apprentices at Levels 4 and 5.

'I couldn't do university, it's not how I learn...because of my dyslexia, being lectured at, I wouldn't be able to take notes because it would get jumbled up. Whereas with the Level 4 ... it was a lot smaller class and I felt more able to ask questions if I couldn't get it... being able to go up higher-level education this way, was really nice.' - Apprentice, Level 4

Barriers experienced by apprentices

Existing workloads

A key concern for apprentices starting a higher-level apprenticeship was the prospect of juggling their workload with the study requirements of their programme. This was a particular barrier for staff who were already in demanding work roles prior to starting their apprenticeship. Those in management roles, or roles where no one could 'cover' their time, explained it was difficult to consistently carve out time for off-the-job training.

'My bosses are really supportive and accommodating but they can't change the fact that there's no money to get anyone to cover me.' - Apprentice, Level 4

Some apprentices reported a lack of support from their employers to manage the apprenticeship study requirements within their working hours. Most of these apprentices were in their employers' first cohort of apprentices and thought that their employer did not fully understand the minimum 20% off-the-job requirement. These apprentices reported high drop-out rates among their colleagues. Some apprentices who were employed at their organisation prior to starting their programme could undertake an apprenticeship providing that there was no reduction in their overall responsibilities or job performance. This made an apprenticeship challenging for an apprentice to manage and resulted in them undertaking learning in their own time. While some apprentices were able to manage learning outside of their working hours without too much difficulty, others with children or caring responsibilities found this more challenging and had fallen behind as a result.

In contrast, apprentices with more autonomy over their workload reported being more able to take the minimum 20% off-the-job training time within their working hours. The prospect of a heavier workload was also less of a concern for apprentices who were new to the organisation and did not have to negotiate changes to an existing role to complete an apprenticeship.

Personal life or wider circumstances

Interviewees reported that apprentices aged 25 and above are more likely to have additional commitments outside of work, including families and caring responsibilities, which can present a barrier to accessing or completing higher-level apprenticeships. Single parents particularly reported concerns in meeting the requirements of the apprenticeship around their workload and caring responsibilities. Apprentices with additional pressures on their time explained that it was essential to have support from their employer and protected time to complete their apprenticeship during working hours. One apprentice who was experiencing difficulties in their personal life was appreciative of the offer to take a break from their course and re-join at a later date.

English and maths

English and maths are a key component of apprenticeships, providing transferable skills for successful career progression. Apprentices undertaking programmes at Level 3 or above are usually required to achieve (or have already achieved) English and maths qualifications at Level 2 or above. Apprentices who took part in this research did not cite maths and English skills requirements of apprenticeships as a barrier, as they had already gained the required qualifications in these subjects.

However, providers and employers reported that the maths and English requirements could be off-putting for those who demonstrate a high level of ability in their roles but do not have certificates to evidence this. These apprentices had to undertake a short English and maths training course within the first six months of their apprenticeship.

'I remember...a learner said to me, 'With all respect, my budget is about £3.5 million and I'm personally responsible for it. Why have I got to do maths and English?' - Provider

Some employers said that their staff could face difficulties in obtaining the level of English and maths competency needed to achieve a higher-level apprenticeship. This was highlighted as an issue in the care sector, where managers accessing a Level 5 apprenticeship had worked their way up from a carer role into management. Individuals who were educated abroad and could not evidence their attainment were also identified as a group with barriers to accessing higher-level apprenticeships.

Study skills and academic ability

Providers highlighted that people who did not like school but have since progressed in their chosen career may have barriers to completing a higher-level apprenticeship, which they said are becoming 'increasingly academic'. This was linked to maths and English requirements, as well as the introduction of end-point assessments within standards.

'I've heard people say, 'I left school because I didn't like it. I don't want to do it now that I'm 45'. – Provider

Some apprentices stated being initially concerned about the academic ability required to gain a higher-level apprenticeship. These included young apprentices who had found

academic study challenging previously and apprentices who had not engaged in academic study for a long time.

'It's a long time since I've been at school... as we get older it's, 'Can I still do this?' You just question yourself' - Apprentice, Level 5

Older apprentices who had concerns about study skills were all on Level 4 or 5 apprenticeships. In these instances, this initial concern was overcome through an understanding of the benefits of an apprenticeship and additional study support from their provider. However, providers highlighted that individuals who do not have a traditionally academic skillset may struggle to complete higher-level apprenticeships, particularly in sectors such as IT and engineering. They stated that this intensifies as apprentices progress to Levels 6 and 7.

'As you go higher and higher through the levels... it is about academic ability.' – Provider

Entering full time employment

The prospect of entering full time employment, particularly when their peers were going to university, was daunting for some young apprentices who had just started their career. Issues such as learning workplace behaviour could require considerable adjustment. These apprentices reported that support from their employer and colleagues focussed on workplace behaviours and challenges were important to address this barrier.

'Going straight into work from school, I was used to ... normal attitudes and behaviours that you get from being surrounded by other teenagers. Coming directly into a quite high responsibility job in an office of adults and professionals... was just a bit more of a behavioural adjustment.' - Apprentice, Level 5

Stigma associated with apprenticeships

There were perceptions among apprentices before they began their programme that an apprenticeship does not have parity of esteem with university qualifications at the equivalent level. Before applying, some had previously viewed apprenticeships as being for people who did not have the academic ability to go to university. Other misconceptions included apprentices being only for young people, and always being low paid.

'You see apprenticeships as being what young people do and they don't get paid very much, and if you're in your 30s and you've got children you wouldn't. If you think, 'I've got to take an apprenticeship, it's only about £4 an hour,' then they can't, I just don't think that people know enough about them, that they can do the higher ones.' - Apprentice, Level 4

These perceptions were held by both young apprentices, often due to the image of apprenticeships portrayed in schools, as well as older apprentices, who associated apprenticeships with day release programmes for tradespeople at lower skills levels.

'I didn't really know that there were different options around. I didn't know that you could do a degree apprenticeship, I didn't know you could go all the way up to Level 7. I thought it was definitely an A-level BTEC kind of thing.' - Apprentice, Level 5

Lack of awareness raising

A lack of awareness raising and promotion of apprenticeships at school and college was also cited as a key reason for misconceptions. Apprentices interviewed often found out about a higher-level apprenticeship opportunity from their employer. Without this proactive approach, apprentices stated that they would not have understood the opportunity that was available to them and how this related to their career aspirations.

In other instances, apprentices became aware of higher-level apprenticeships by chance, when the individual made their own enquiries about non-apprenticeship training or learning pathways. Apprentices suggested that lack of awareness could prevent others from accessing higher-level apprenticeships.

Suggestions to improve access

Promoting key information about apprenticeships

Interviewees highlighted the importance of dispelling myths about apprenticeships to prevent people thinking that an apprenticeship is not for someone like them.

'Raising the awareness, but not just that this is what apprenticeships are, but aiming them at all different types of people because an apprentice could be anybody' - Provider

To increase access to higher-level apprenticeships, it was suggested that more information should be provided on several aspects of apprenticeships, including:

- The range of opportunities available; addressing misunderstandings about the types of roles available and the individuals who access apprenticeships including typical ages, levels, occupations and sectors.
- Pay rates for apprentices; overcoming misconceptions that all apprentices are paid the apprentice minimum wage.
- The value placed on apprenticeships by employers, including the parity of status with alternative pathways such as university, and the range of career pathways available.
- The types of workplace roles and responsibilities of higher-level apprentices; dispelling the myth that apprentices were assigned to menial tasks and less respected in the workplace than their colleagues. This was particularly important for new starters.
- The standard of work required within a higher-level apprenticeship, such as information on the high quality of training, course content and examples of assignments and tasks. Apprentices highlighted that this prior understanding would enable them to consider the support they may need to cope with the apprenticeship requirements.

- The support available to apprentices from employers, including how the employer would facilitate the minimum 20% off-the-job requirement and help to manage their work-based support needs. This could include support focussed on workplace behaviours and challenges provided to young apprentices who were adjusting to the new role, or support with managing workloads.
- The learning support offered by providers, including the amount and type of support they could expect from their provider. Apprentices with initial concerns about their academic abilities often described receiving more support than they had expected from their provider. Apprentices suggested that increased awareness of the study support available would encourage more people to access higher-level apprenticeships.

Employers, providers and apprentices focussed on the importance of promoting higher-level apprenticeship opportunities and pathways to school age pupils as a viable alternative to university. They did not make suggestions for recruiting older adults to apprenticeships, for example those seeking retrain.

Employers highlighted several difficulties with school engagement, including the general lack of awareness of apprenticeships in some schools. These employers highlighted the need for a co-ordinated strategy and increased partnership working to meet with large numbers of schools at once.

‘Some way for employers to be able to engage with a large number of schools that’s supported at local council level. local councils taking more of an approach.’ - Employer

Some employers and providers also highlighted the importance of engaging parents and guardians and informing them of the opportunities available through higher-level apprenticeships. These respondents said that parents and guardians may hold outdated views of apprenticeships which can act as a barrier for young people to engage with apprenticeships as an alternative to the higher education route.

Apprentices suggested that previous cohorts of apprentices were key to promoting opportunities. This would enable those considering a specific apprenticeship to hear about their experiences and ask any questions, such as around managing workload and techniques they had used to manage their time.

‘At our induction, we had people from the previous year come in to let us know...how they coped with it and how they manage their time...that was useful.’ - Apprentice, Level 5

Improving access for underrepresented groups

There were several approaches that providers, employers and apprentices identified to increase access to higher-level apprenticeships for underrepresented groups who can face additional barriers as described in the previous chapter.

Promotion of opportunities

Interviewees highlighted that promotional efforts should be targeted to ensure that they reach a broad range of people. For instance, including people from diverse backgrounds in relevant promotional material, highlighting the support available for people with LDD, or targeting engagement through widening participation initiatives. Some providers and employers described widening participation initiatives they were involved with, including:

- University events focussed on new higher-level apprenticeship opportunities, inviting schools and colleges that do not have a high proportion of pupils going to university. This involved practical work experience and presentations to raise awareness of higher and degree-level apprenticeships.
- Schools outreach in deprived areas, or areas with high proportions of pupils from BAME backgrounds.
- Employers who have specific targeted programmes in place to attract underrepresented groups into certain sectors, for example carrying out school visits to encourage more girls into the STEM sector.

Employers and apprentices recognised that enrolling existing staff on apprenticeships did not tend to widen participation. Therefore, some interviewees suggested that employers should open the offer to new staff to allow underrepresented groups to apply. It was also suggested that these higher-level apprenticeships could be promoted in a broader range of locations such as community centres, job centres and on social media.

Financial support for apprentices

Financial support for expenses incurred when starting an apprenticeship was a further suggestion to support those from low-income backgrounds. This could include funding for the cost of season travel tickets or a deposit on rental accommodation for new staff apprentices who had to move to be near to their new employer.

‘For people whose families have a lower income; it might help them to move somewhere else if they need to. Once they start earning, they should be okay, but it’s the fact of moving somewhere else...If you’ve got to pay yearly train ticket...it can be a couple of thousand pounds and not everyone can afford that.’ - Apprentice, Level 6

Support for employers

Some employers commented that they have a lack of confidence in how to attract or engage with a more diverse workforce and would welcome government advice on this, as well as case studies and toolkits which promote different experiences. This could include guidance on how to diversify the profile of employees selected for apprenticeships.

‘It’s help and advice on...different groups of people, what is the best way to attract them? Who do we speak to for advice? It’s getting advice on, are our adverts written in the right way for everyone? Are we getting the key points that different people look for? ... We try and make it attractive, but are we saying the right things? I don’t know.’ - Employer

Pathways and referrals to higher-level apprenticeships

Some employers and providers highlighted that increasing diversity in higher-level apprenticeships requires more pathways into apprenticeships. This includes opportunities to try out apprentice job roles practically through work experience and improved careers information, advice and guidance.

Changes to apprenticeships

Finally, some providers and employers suggested that widening participation requires changing some elements of higher-level apprenticeships. For instance, for people with LDD, there may need to be more flexibility in course requirements as certain aspects of apprenticeships, such as completing e-portfolios and End Point Assessments (EPAs), could be limiting for some people with LDD. Some providers felt that the EPAs could deter apprentices as they resemble exams, and apprenticeships traditionally provide an alternative vocationally based route for people who feel less confident in exams.

Factors that influence apprentice experience and completions

This section reviews how the support provided by providers and employers can impact on the apprenticeship experience and apprentices' suggestions to improve this for others.

Provider support

Quality of training and teaching

Apprentices valued tutors who displayed high levels of enthusiasm, knowledge and experience in their subject. In addition, apprentices appreciated opportunities that the provider created for them to learn from others in their sector. For existing employees who had been in their role for a long time, high quality teaching resulted in them having refreshed knowledge and a renewed enthusiasm for their job.

In contrast, training which was not seen as relevant or useful had a large impact on apprentice experience. There were isolated cases of apprentices on IT standards who found that the training they received was not sufficiently up to date. This had a detrimental impact on their enjoyment and perceived value of the apprenticeship.

Support from tutors

Communication and support from the tutor provided at regular intervals, such as termly meetings, were important factors for some apprentices. Apprentices were most reassured when they had set times planned in to meet with tutors, and/or they were confident they could approach them when needed. This support includes providing an understanding of the types of work required, feedback on their progress and information about the next steps to help them prepare. Apprentices also appreciated encouragement from their tutor and the offer of additional support when needed.

'They were really supportive... approachable, and friendly. My assessor was always on-hand... we'd have open discussions about the topics.' - Apprentice, Level 4

Face-to-face contact with tutors and site visits were found to be particularly useful. Some apprentices who lacked confidence in their study skills and those on Levels 6 and 7 apprenticeships reported that minimal contact with their tutor and a focus on self-directed study was detrimental to their experience.

Access to specialist support

Access to specialist or additional support was also seen as important by apprentices, employers and providers. Some interviewees highlighted that providers' support services for learners are not always suitable or easily accessible to apprentices who do not visit the provider's site frequently. However, support from the provider with study skills was highly valued by some apprentices, particularly those with LDD or those who were less confident in their academic ability. This support often included guidance on task management, time management, assignment writing support and additional revision sessions.

Employer and provider communication

Crucially, apprentices highlighted that the employer and provider needed to regularly communicate to ensure that apprentice support needs were met. Where communication between employer and provider had been poor, apprentices reported feeling unsupported with any challenges they encountered with their employer.

'I think if the training providers could speak more with our employers... [We told them] 'We don't have a time with our mentors,' they said, 'It's up to your employer so we can't do anything about that.' Maybe if they would talk more' - Apprentice, Level 5

Apprentices stressed the importance of regular three-way review meetings between the employer, provider and the apprentice in order to identify any support needs. Ongoing communication between all parties was also seen as important to ensure that support accounted for their changing needs and circumstances during the apprenticeship, as higher-level apprenticeships span several years.

Employer support

Regular communication with line managers

Support from their line managers was considered by apprentices to be a critical factor in their overall experience. Apprentices valued regular communication about what they were learning and to check whether they required additional support.

'I know people who, if they're asked [about any problems], they'd say something, but if they weren't, they'd keep quiet. Having constant reviews asking if everything's okay, gives you an opportunity to say 'Actually, no. There's a problem here.' - Apprentice, Level 6

Examples of positive experiences of line manager support included: providing feedback on apprentices' assignments, discussing topics the apprentice was studying, arranging for the apprentice to gain experience in a certain area of the job to support their learning, and facilitating contact between a mentor and an apprentice.

A crucial aspect of employer support was ensuring that the apprentice could take the required minimum 20% off-the-job training time. This was a widespread experience from apprentices in the research. Apprentices who had time assigned to off-the-job training agreed at the outset of their apprenticeship felt that this significantly improved their experience. In contrast, when this time was not provided or protected, some apprentices reported feeling too 'guilty' to ask for this. This could lead to apprentices spending significant amounts of time studying at evenings and weekends which impacted their ability to complete the apprenticeship in the set time, or at all. Apprentices in this research who were not able to undertake additional study outside working hours (for instance due to caring responsibilities) reported falling significantly behind, or failing certain modules.

Mentoring support

The mentoring support available in the workplace was also seen as a critical factor in the positive experience and completion rates of apprentices. This was particularly valued by apprentices with LDD, new staff members, or those who were experiencing issues in their personal lives. Having an approachable individual within the organisation to speak to when their line manager may not be available about any issues that may be affecting them was seen as helpful. Some providers felt that SMEs were less likely to have the capacity to provide workplace mentors than larger employers. Large organisations with an established apprenticeship offer were more likely to also offer support from older cohorts of apprentices, or 'buddying' schemes alongside mentoring.

Apprentices described a range of valuable support from mentors including: an additional perspective and knowledge on their subject, practical advice on study skills and support if the apprentice was experiencing any issues with their line manager.

'[I can ask my mentor] is this something that you've experienced?... [They] ask questions to prompt me into thinking that little bit differently about something' - Apprentice, Level 5

The success of a mentoring relationship depended on whether the mentor had the relevant knowledge and experience. When apprentices were assigned to a mentor who was not in a similar job, they were less able to discuss the content of the apprenticeship programme. The shift pattern and workload of a mentor was also important. If a mentor was not available for their apprentice, this impacted on their ability to support their learning.

Other sources of workplace support

The support from colleagues was also an important factor, but apprentices had mixed experiences. Some apprentices reported positive experiences from colleagues who had discussed the apprenticeship programme content with them, explained their own job roles and invited apprentices to work with them on tasks. This resulted in development of their overall knowledge and experience of their job role. However, other apprentices had found their colleagues did not understand the purpose and value of apprenticeships and were less supportive of their apprenticeship. This was compounded when apprentices felt unsupported by their managers and felt it was solely their responsibility to justify their reduced time on the job.

'If it's not benefiting them directly immediately then why should they help you out?... You had to definitely stand up for yourself ... if you're going into it you need to be strong minded that you are doing the right thing for yourself.' - Apprentice, Level 4

Apprentices who experienced a lack of support and understanding from colleagues tended to be in their employer's first cohort of apprentices. This could be a result of the employer not having had the time to bed-in the apprenticeship programme to the workplace culture, including not raising awareness among staff of the purpose, value and requirements of apprenticeships on the employer apprentice and wider staff.

Suggestions to improve experience and completions

Apprentices provided suggestions to maximise higher-level apprenticeship experience and outcomes. Suggestions included actions that could be taken by providers, employers and colleagues prior to the start of an apprenticeship programme during the set-up phase, and during the apprenticeship programme. The table overleaf sets out a summary of their suggestions and the intended results of implementing these.

	Actions taken	By who	Intended result
Prior to starting an apprenticeship	<p>Apprentices are provided with the programme content and tasks, expectation of the time commitment needed to spend on off-the-job training and the timeline to complete different elements.</p> <p>Apprentices are provided with the requirements of their job role while on the programme, including tailored workplace support for new starters, or changes to the workload of existing staff to accommodate the apprenticeship.</p> <p>Apprentices are provided with information about the support available to them from their employer and provider, and how to access these.</p>	<p>Providers</p> <p>Employers/ line managers</p>	<p>Apprentices more able to ensure they made necessary adjustments to their working routine.</p> <p>Apprentices have exposure to all work-based tasks required to pass their programme.</p> <p>Apprentices empowered to secure the support from their employer and/or their provider that they need to complete the course.</p>
At the outset of the apprenticeship	<p>Line managers provided with understanding of the value of apprenticeships to the business and how to support apprentices.</p> <p>Line managers provided with an explanation of the minimum 20% off-the-job training requirement. This and other support provision e.g. mentoring, are set out and agreed between employer and apprentice.</p> <p>Apprentices provided with information about how to contact their tutor and the types of additional support they can request.</p> <p>Employers raise understanding and awareness of apprenticeships among the wider workforce.</p>	<p>Providers/ Employers</p> <p>Employers/ line managers</p>	<p>Line managers are empowered to support their apprentices and foster a supportive workplace environment.</p> <p>The commitment to off-the-job training requirement is clearly set out between the provider, employer and apprentice.</p> <p>Colleagues have increased understanding of the value of apprenticeships.</p>
During the apprenticeship	<p>Providers check that apprentices are taking their minimum 20% off-the-job training time and liaise with the employer if required.</p> <p>Line managers support apprentices during the programme through regular catch-ups to review progress and identify any support needs.</p>	<p>Providers</p> <p>Employers/ line managers</p>	<p>This approach would help to ensure that where possible, problems are identified at an early opportunity, before a situation escalates.</p>

Conclusion

L&W was commissioned by DfE to undertake research to explore the extent to which apprenticeships at Level 4 and above are supporting social mobility for people from diverse backgrounds.

Despite a drop in the number of apprenticeships in the UK in recent years, the number and proportion of apprenticeship starts at Level 4 and above has increased. Interviews with employers and providers indicated that an expanded range of higher-level apprenticeship standards are enabling employers to meet their business needs through apprenticeships.

The research found barriers which prevent employers and providers from increasing their use of higher-level apprenticeships. These include challenges in understanding and managing the minimum 20% off-the-job training requirement for senior staff and a shortage of standards offering progression routes to higher-level apprenticeships. Some employers reported challenges in sourcing provision. This could be partially explained by provider barriers to delivering apprenticeships at Level 4 and above, such as attracting qualified tutors and changes to funding of some higher-level standards.

Analysis of ILR data revealed the ways in which the profile of apprentices on higher-level programmes differs from apprentices on lower-level programmes and learners on higher education courses. It showed that the profile of higher-level apprentices varies across the different levels and standards.

The age profile of apprentices varied between levels, with apprentices undertaking Level 5 programmes being distinctly older in comparison to other higher-level apprentices. In contrast, the age profiles of apprentices at Levels 6 and 7 were younger and similar to those at Level 3. Apprentices on Level 5 standards were also more likely to be female and from deprived areas than apprentices on other higher-level programmes.

There was a lower proportion of apprentices with LDD on higher-level programmes in comparison to higher rates of participation in Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships. Providers said that representation of individuals with LDD in senior positions may be smaller depending on the employer's recruitment processes and the support they provide their staff. Undergraduates also had higher proportions of people with LDD than higher-level apprenticeships. Interviewees highlighted that the level of provider support for apprentices with LDD may be less consistent than undergraduates.

People from BAME backgrounds have higher rates of participation in higher education than in higher-level apprenticeships. However, the profile of higher-level apprentices is more ethnically diverse overall than lower-level programmes. Representation of BAME apprentices differs depending on the sector subject area, with higher participation of apprentices from BAME backgrounds in information and communications technology but lower participation in the construction sector.

Apprentices from the most deprived areas are underrepresented in higher-level apprenticeships when compared to apprentices in the most affluent areas. These

differences are particularly apparent at Level 4 and 6. This could be linked to the difference in qualification levels across regions and the supply of higher-level apprenticeships in different areas.

Apprentices on higher-level programmes highlighted varying motivations for accessing their apprenticeship opportunity. This included career progression, access to work-based learning and the ability to access high-level learning with limited impacts to their personal time or finances. Interviewees also revealed barriers which may prevent individuals from accessing apprenticeships. The lack of promotion of these opportunities was identified as the key barrier, with apprentices only becoming aware of higher-level apprenticeships through 'chance' encounters, their own enquiries, or through their employer.

Suggestions for improving access to higher-level apprenticeships focused on promoting opportunities more widely to address misconceptions about apprenticeships. Apprentices suggested that efforts to promote higher-level apprenticeships should draw attention to the range of opportunities available, the quality of training, pay rates, level of status in a workplace and the support they should expect from their provider and employer.

Respondents recognised that targeted engagement was needed to address underrepresentation of some populations within certain higher-level apprenticeships, including BAME people, women, people with LDD and people from disadvantaged areas. One suggestion to increase access for these populations was for employers to open their apprenticeship offer to new staff, rather than enrolling their existing employees, and promote these widely. Further suggestions included expanding widening participation initiatives, financial support being available for apprentices at the start of their programme, practical guidance for employers to engage with a more diverse workforce, and the promotion of pathways to higher-level apprenticeships.

The level of support from apprentices' employer and provider was key to their ability to succeed in their higher-level apprenticeship. Apprentices with positive experiences of their apprenticeship felt that the support was tailored to meet their needs; conducted in agreement between them, their employer and their provider; and adapted regularly. The key element which required intervention was in managing the minimum 20% off-the-job training time. Apprentices who did not have employer support to protect this time risked being pressurised by themselves, colleagues or managers to undertake this in their spare time, with implications of a higher risk of non-completion. The research highlighted a role for providers in ensuring that this time was protected, and the importance of establishing an understanding between all parties from the outset.

Considerations for policy and practice

This research highlights a range of factors which support or constrain the use of higher-level apprenticeships. To ensure that these apprenticeships support social mobility, it is necessary to address barriers to the supply and take up of these opportunities.

- The effective interpretation and management of the minimum 20% off-the-job training could be a source of contention for higher-level apprentices, particularly those with demanding, inflexible workloads and/or family responsibilities. Negative perceptions of this requirement was also an identified barrier for employers offering higher-level apprenticeships if they feared reduced productivity from senior staff for a lengthy duration of their programme. To ensure employers interpret and manage this effectively, DfE or the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) should disseminate clear information and guidance about this requirement for higher-level apprentices, with case study examples to support implementation.
- Addressing financial barriers preventing SMEs from offering higher-level apprenticeships is important to improve access to these opportunities, particularly in areas which have a high proportion of smaller businesses. DfE and IfATE should ensure that information about accessing levy transfers is shared with SMEs to support them to access funding to offer higher-level apprenticeship where this is a barrier.
- Apprentices reported a lack of promotion about higher-level apprenticeships, which meant that misconceptions about apprentices being low-level and for younger people only were widespread. Schools and colleges should ensure that positive messages about higher-level apprenticeships including the financial benefits, career progression and the gaining of vocational knowledge are promoted alongside higher education. Promotion of higher-level apprenticeships, and pathways to these in different industries, should be supported by high quality careers information, advice and guidance. This can be delivered by schools, colleges, training providers through the employer and/or wider services such as the National Careers Service.
- Employers requested encouragement and support to increase the diversity of their higher-level apprentices, and overall workforces. Some commented that they lack confidence in how to do this. DfE or IfATE, with the support of sector bodies, should disseminate clear and practical guidance or toolkits for employers and providers, including case study examples to replicate and adapt. Guidance should include how employers can also diversify the profile of their apprentices through the selection of existing staff who undertake an apprenticeship.
- To widen participation in apprenticeships at Level 4 and above, progression routes from lower level apprenticeships need to be clear. Providers and employers should promote opportunities to progress to higher levels following the completion of Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeships. Providers should ensure that adequate learner support is in place for apprentices to manage this transition, including high quality careers advice and guidance.

Appendix 1

Provider sample frame

Total	Provider type			Apprenticeship levels offered				English regions
	Further education college	Independent training provider	Higher education institution	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	
10	3	4	3	8	6	5	3	9/9

Employer sample frame ¹⁹

Total	Apprenticeship levels offered				Employer size		English regions represented
	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	SME ²⁰	Large	
8	8	5	5	2	1	7	8/9

Apprentice sample frame

Total	Age		Gender		Apprenticeship level				Sector subject area represented	English regions represented
	Under 25	Over 25	Female	Male	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7		
20	9	11	11	9	6	4	5	5	9/12	9/9

¹⁹ SME employers are currently underrepresented in the interviews but gaps in the quota will be filled when all employer interviews are completed.

²⁰ This research uses the definition of SME as a business with less than 250 employees.