

# Understanding apprenticeship progression

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May 2020

Published by National Learning and Work Institute

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Company registration no. 2603322 | Charity registration no. 1002775

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# About Learning and Work Institute

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# Contents

Executive summary .....	5
Introduction .....	8
Methodology.....	9
Structure of report .....	9
Progression routes through apprenticeships.....	11
Apprenticeship progression routes .....	11
Employer motivations for offering apprenticeship progression pathways .....	13
Barriers to employers offering apprenticeship progression pathways .....	16
Improving apprenticeship progression routes.....	20
Apprentice experiences of progression.....	21
Apprentice motivations .....	21
How opportunities were promoted.....	23
Factors influencing progression .....	24
Progression outcomes.....	30
Improving apprenticeship progression.....	31
Conclusion .....	35
Appendix 1 .....	38

# Executive summary

The government has an agenda to grow the number and quality of apprenticeships.<sup>1</sup> Progression for apprentices is important to ensure apprenticeships support social mobility and represent a good investment for individuals, employers and the government.

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2019 to undertake research to provide a better understanding of how people are supported to progress through apprenticeships, to at least Level 3 and above. The research aimed to gather evidence on:

- How progression is defined
- Expectations for individual progression
- Motivations for progression
- Barriers to progression, and potential solutions to address these
- How assessment of prior learning influences the level of programme people undertake

The research involved qualitative interviews with sector bodies, employers, training providers and apprentices. Interviews were conducted with organisations operating in 'high value' sectors<sup>2</sup>, and those which have established progression pathways through apprenticeships: Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies; Construction, Planning and the Built Environment; ICT; and Business, Finance and Law. It should therefore be noted that the findings may not be indicative of employer behaviour more widely, although they do provide insights that could be helpful when considering progression in other sectors.

Interviews explored how employers are using apprenticeships within their organisations to progress staff and any challenges with implementing this approach. Interviews with apprentices explored their expectations and experiences of progression.

## Progression routes through apprenticeships

Employers, sector bodies and providers understood progression to be career development with an appropriate rise in responsibility and salary. They explained that opportunities to progress vary across different occupations and tended to describe linear pathways within their sector.

Employers' main motivations for using apprenticeships to support staff progression included using their apprenticeship levy; meeting staff development needs; improving staff retention and loyalty; and maintaining a talent pipeline. Employers, providers and sector

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

<sup>2</sup> High value sectors are those where apprenticeships provide higher than average earning potential, (based on individual wage returns having completed an apprenticeship).

bodies described stronger progression routes where apprenticeships were embedded within professionally accredited pathways, and where employers had an established history of using apprenticeships or vocational training for staff development.

The main barriers that prevented employers from offering progression through apprenticeships included difficulties in fulfilling occupational requirements of apprenticeship standards; standards not keeping up with industry changes; the minimum length of apprenticeships being considered too long; and managing the 20% off-the-job requirement. Employers were also restricted by a lack of available standards or provision to offer a full apprenticeship progression pathway. Finally, some employers and providers cited wider organisational barriers preventing staff progression, for example a lack of vacancies at more senior levels.

Employer size has an impact on employers' ability to use apprenticeships to progress staff. Smaller employers may have fewer available roles for apprentices to progress into, less opportunity for apprentices to develop and demonstrate competencies required by standards, and limited resources to manage the additional workload of implementing apprenticeships within their business.

### **Apprentice experiences of progression**

Apprentices defined progression in a number of ways including securing a promotion; improving their competence at work; accreditation of skills at a higher level; and gaining a higher salary. Completing an apprenticeship, and in some cases progressing through multiple levels, helped to meet these ambitions. Apprenticeships were an attractive alternative to other forms of learning as they enabled apprentices to develop their skills during working hours and while receiving a salary.

Apprentices said that opportunities to progress through apprenticeships were not sufficiently promoted. Most apprentices heard about apprenticeships from brief and incidental interactions with an individual from their employer, or provider, school or college. Those who heard about apprenticeships from their employer were often only aware of specific programmes offered within that company rather than wider opportunities available. They described needing to undertake their own research to understand whether apprenticeship progression was the right option for them.

Several factors impacted apprentices' on-programme experience and their progression prospects, including:

- The assessment of prior learning, which determines whether the apprenticeship provides the right level of learning to support progression.
- The quality of support from the provider and employer to help apprentices to maximise the on- and off-the-job learning.

- The level of English and maths support available, which impacts on the ability and willingness of some individuals to progress through apprenticeships.
- Low pay rates, allowed through the apprenticeship minimum wage, which influence the opportunities that individuals with greater financial responsibilities can access.
- Wider circumstances, such as caring responsibilities or health issues, which can affect apprentices' ability to manage their programme or progress in work.
- The extent that progression opportunities were available and/or were aligned with apprentices' career goals.

Progression outcomes achieved by apprentices included securing a permanent position or promotion at a higher wage or accessing further learning at a higher-level. Apprentices also reported other positive impacts such as increased confidence and clearer career ambitions, which they felt improved their longer-term progression prospects.

### **Considerations for policy and practice**

These research findings have explored factors which promote and constrain progression from and through apprenticeships. The findings highlight that to improve progression, actions could be taken to:

- Increase the number and range of opportunities available by supporting employers to implement progression routes in their organisations, with particular support for SMEs.
- Improve the promotion of apprenticeships to individuals, supported by high quality careers information, advice and guidance.
- Ensure that apprentices have access to high quality and proactive support from both their employer and training provider while they are on their programme(s).

# Introduction

The government has an agenda to grow the number and quality of apprenticeships<sup>3</sup>. Apprenticeships can be an effective way of training new recruits, and of retraining or upskilling existing workers. Programmes are available from Level 2 to Level 7, including degree apprenticeships, and support individuals to progress their careers.

Progression for apprentices is important to ensure apprenticeships support social mobility and represent a good investment for individuals, employers and the government. The government's vision is for more people to have the opportunity to start an apprenticeship at Level 3 and in occupations and sectors that offer progression and higher wage returns.

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) undertook research on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) to provide a better understanding of how people are supported to progress through apprenticeships, to at least Level 3 and above. This research focusses on employers in 'high value' sectors<sup>4</sup>, which have established progression pathways through apprenticeships: Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies; Construction, Planning and the Built Environment'; ICT; and Business, Finance and Law. It should therefore be noted that the findings may not be indicative of behaviour more widely, although they do provide insights that could be helpful when considering progression in other sectors.

The research aimed to gather evidence in relation to the following areas:

- How progression is defined
- Expectations for individual progression
- Motivations for progression
- Barriers to progression
- Potential solutions for addressing barriers to progression
- How assessment of prior learning influences the level of programme people undertake.

The research involved in-depth qualitative interviews with sector bodies, employers, training providers and apprentices. Interviews explored how employers are using apprenticeships within their organisations to progress staff and any challenges with implementing this approach. Interviews with apprentices explored their expectations and experiences of progression.

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<sup>3</sup> HM Government (2015) [English Apprenticeships: Our 2020 Vision](#).

<sup>4</sup> The term 'high value' refers to apprenticeships which provide higher than average earning potential, and/or progression opportunities (based on returns to individuals from wages having completed an apprenticeship).

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

## Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to facilitate a detailed exploration of individual expectations, definitions, motivations and barriers to progression for apprentices. It includes the perspectives of five sector bodies, eight employers, 10 training providers and 20 apprentices.

Sector bodies, employers and providers were identified and recruited using a combination of publicly available data, existing contacts from L&W's wider work on apprenticeships and in-work progression, and snowballing. Participants were sampled to provide a wide range of perspectives including a spread of the specified high value sectors<sup>5</sup>, employer sizes, training provider types and geography. Gaps in these characteristics were filled using Individualised Learner Record (ILR)<sup>6</sup> data.

Apprentice participants were recruited on a purposive quota basis, using ILR data as a sampling tool. ILR data was taken from four academic years<sup>7</sup> to provide a sample of current apprentices and those who have completed their apprenticeship. Participants were sampled using ILR data to account for age, gender, type of apprenticeship (level, sector subject area, standard/framework) and geography.

The sample frame for participants is listed in Appendix 1. All participants were recruited using a combination of email and telephone approaches. Interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes to one hour, were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Interview transcripts were analysed using a framework approach to draw out themes and patterns in the evidence.

Research participants were sampled to obtain a wide range of perspectives. It is important to note that the findings are not intended to be, and cannot be taken as, representative of wider populations of employers, providers or 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 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 an analysis of:

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<sup>5</sup> Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies; Construction, Planning and the Built Environment; ICT; and Business, Finance and Law.

<sup>6</sup> The Individualised Learner Record (ILR) is learner data that publicly funded colleges, training organisations, local authorities and employers (FE providers) must collect and return to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) in order to claim government funding.

<sup>7</sup> 2015/16 to 2018/19

- Progression routes through apprenticeships, exploring progression pathways in high value sectors, and employer motivations and barriers to using apprenticeships to support these.
- Apprentices' expectations and experiences of progression, exploring the factors which impact on their ability to progress.

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

# Progression routes through apprenticeships

This chapter draws upon interviews with sector bodies, employers and training providers operating in four high value<sup>8</sup> sectors to review the progression routes available through apprenticeships. It also explores employer motivations and barriers to using apprenticeships as a progression pathway, including factors which influence their ability to do so, such as sector and employer size.

## Key chapter findings

- Employers' main motivations to use apprenticeships to support progression included: using their apprenticeship levy; meeting staff development needs; improving staff retention and loyalty; and maintaining a talent pipeline.
- Stronger progression routes exist where apprenticeships are embedded within professionally accredited pathways, and where employers have an established history of using apprenticeships or vocational training for staff development.
- The main barriers preventing progression included: challenges fulfilling occupational requirements of apprenticeship standards; standards not keeping up with industry changes; the minimum length of apprenticeships; and the 20% off-the-job requirement.
- Other barriers that prevent employers from using apprenticeships to support progression included: a lack of available standards or provision; and organisational barriers to employers progressing their staff more generally.
- Providers reported that SMEs are more likely than larger employers to face difficulties in using apprenticeships to support progression because of: a lack of job roles for apprentices to progress into; less opportunity for apprentices to develop and demonstrate competencies required by standards; and less resource to manage the additional workload of implementing apprenticeships within their business.

## Apprenticeship progression routes

Employers, sector bodies and providers defined progression as career development and an appropriate rise in responsibility and salary. They explained that opportunities to progress vary across different occupations and tended to describe linear pathways within their sector.

Employers and sector bodies reported established progression routes in apprenticeships in engineering, accountancy, chartered surveying and project management<sup>9</sup>. In these

<sup>8</sup> Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies; Construction, Planning and the Built Environment'; ICT; and Business, Finance and Law

<sup>9</sup> The IT sector is underrepresented in the interviews. One specialist IT training provider reported a lack of progression pathways through apprenticeships in that sector, in part because employers currently do not have sufficient understanding of the apprenticeship system and potential progression routes. The provider also said that there is a lack of Level 4 standards in IT.

cases, the apprenticeship standards were fully embedded in the existing professional accreditation pathways for these occupations.

*'The big difference with the apprenticeship standards is that they're aligned more closely with professional membership, compared to previous apprenticeships...as a result of that, if you successfully complete the apprenticeship it provides a big boost to your career.'* – Sector body, construction sector

These clear routes enable employees to progress through apprenticeship levels, providing that opportunities are available in their organisation. In these instances, apprentices can enter a higher-level role partially qualified (i.e. they may have completed a programme at a lower level), and gain skills needed to become fully competent. Larger employers in the engineering sector reported progression routes from Level 2 and Level 3 to higher and degree apprenticeships. The chartered surveying apprenticeship pathway goes from Level 3 to 6, which is aligned with industry membership of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). Accountancy apprenticeships similarly have been based around the existing qualifications framework, with an Accountancy Technician at Level 2 to Level 4, and Accountancy at Levels 3 to 7.

Some employers with less experience of offering apprenticeships were not able to comment on the extent to which progression was available within their organisation beyond individual examples. For example, employers who have only offered apprenticeships since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy had not yet had their first cohort of Level 3 apprentices complete their programmes.

The specific occupation of the apprentice also impacts on available progression routes. For example, the progression route through apprenticeships for human resources staff is Level 3 to Level 5, whereas an accountancy apprenticeship progression route is available from Level 2 Accounts Assistant to Level 3 Assistant Accountant, Level 4 Professional Accounting Technician and a Level 7 Accountancy Professional. This is because expectations vary across different occupations in relation to the level that staff start at and progress to. One large construction employer interviewed said that they map out progression routes for their staff at recruitment, and that these differ depending on the role.

*'We know that progress is going to happen when we recruit them because we've mapped that journey out... If you took a plumber on you would want to do Level 2 and 3 to make sure they had full capability. If you took an engineer on, you'd bring them in at Level 4, but you want to get them through to Level 6.'* – Large employer, construction sector

Some progression routes require a change in role type to access higher levels of apprenticeship. For example, in the construction sector, employers, providers and sector bodies reported that progression is common in a range of trades-based apprenticeships from Level 2 to Level 3. However, progressing to higher-level apprenticeships at Level 4 and above usually requires a role change to focus on management.

In other instances, there are gaps in the standards, limiting progression until these are developed and approved. Examples cited included Human Resources at Level 3 and Level 5, and Civil Engineering, Building Services and Transport Planning at Level 3 and Level 6.

In some cases, employers and sector bodies reported that apprenticeships had replaced their previous progression pathways. This was most common among larger employers and in cases where apprenticeship standards had been matched to existing accreditation pathways. Most respondents viewed this positively, commenting that apprenticeships had formalised their progression routes, or made these clearer and more robust. Some highlighted routes which had emerged from using apprenticeships, such as progression into leadership and management roles.

Some respondents asserted that the drive to use apprenticeships altered the way that companies recruit and offer progression to staff. For instance, an engineering sector employer said that higher-level apprenticeships have enabled the business to progress a new pool of candidates who have lower qualifications to the level required in their industry. A sector body in the finance sector described a change to hiring high-achieving school leavers, rather than providing graduate conversion courses to their employees.

Opportunities for progression are also related to the size of an employer. A sector body for the digital sector reported that apprenticeships had replaced other training routes within large employers, but SMEs tended to provide alternative training to progress staff. Even where standards allow progression, sector bodies commonly stated that smaller employers are less likely to provide this.

## **Employer motivations for offering apprenticeship progression pathways**

Employers' main motivations for using apprenticeships to support progression pathways included:

- Using their apprenticeship levy
- Meeting staff development needs
- Improving staff retention and loyalty
- Maintaining a talent pipeline.

Employers, providers and sector bodies highlighted two key factors which enabled the use of apprenticeships to support progression. These were: the ability to build on established progression pathways within the organisation; and an established history of using apprenticeships or vocational training. Employers and sectors with long traditions of using apprenticeships often had more trust in the quality of apprenticeships, had buy-in to the use of apprenticeships at senior levels and, in some cases, had directly shaped new standards to meet their needs.

## Using their apprenticeship levy

Spending their levy was often described by respondents as a key motivation for levy-paying employers to use apprenticeships for staff development and progression. Some providers and sector bodies reported that the levy had replaced staff development budgets for some employers. However, some large employers interviewed referred to the levy as a catalyst for strategically developing a progression structure within the company. For instance, by replacing an ad hoc apprenticeship offer with a coordinated use of apprenticeships aligned to the company's training requirements and long-term succession planning.

Some larger companies employ specific staff members to coordinate their apprenticeship offer. For instance, one employer has a Head of Apprentices who develops pathways through apprenticeships, including progression to higher levels. The progression pathways differ according to the role. Trade based occupations, such as carpenter, electrician and plumber, tend to offer progression from Level 2 to Level 3. Progression from Level 4 up to Level 7 tends to be for civil engineers, quantity surveyors and leadership and management positions.

*'I would understand their progress within any level that they're at, and then it would be going to the business and saying, 'Do we feel the need to progress in their current role?' If yes, then back to the provider, 'Can you support this?' – Large employer, construction and engineering sector*

## Meeting staff development needs

Staff development was also commonly cited as a motivation for employers. Some employers and providers felt that the ability to apply and utilise knowledge in a work-based context made apprenticeships a more attractive option to develop and progress their staff than other types of non-work-based learning. The immediate application of learning and skills ensured that they were retained.

*'Instead of doing an apprenticeship you could just send them on a training course. The problem with that is retention of knowledge because...if they don't utilise it, they forget it... Apprenticeships are a period of time that you are utilising what you learn every day and are able to evidence that you understand that' – Independent training provider*

Some providers reported witnessing an increase in employers offering apprenticeships to develop the skills of existing staff, such as team leading and management apprenticeships for staff who have worked their way up to management roles. This suggests that, in some cases, employers are using apprenticeships to accredit existing skills.

*'Some [employers and providers] are utilising apprenticeships that are really for staff development, as courses and not in the true sense of what an apprenticeship should be...there's been a massive spike in Management and Team Leading apprenticeships...these people are actually working in those jobs already so shouldn't be doing an apprenticeship.' – Provider, FE college*

## **Increasing staff retention and loyalty**

Some employers interviewed use apprenticeships to recruit entry-level employees into the workforce and subsequently offer opportunities to progress to higher-level programmes. A key motivation for this was to encourage staff retention through demonstrating a willingness to invest in their professional development. One provider noted that when employees self-financed their learning, they might be less loyal to the company, due to a lack of employer investment in their development.

*‘The employer, anecdotal feedback is that the learners are more loyal to that firm because they’ve been looked after.’* – Sector body, construction sector

Apprenticeships were commonly described as vital to supporting progression and retention in occupations within engineering, construction and finance sectors<sup>10</sup>. For example, employers offering accountancy apprenticeships reported that it can take three to six years to complete a Level 7 Chartered Accountant apprenticeship. Where this progression is offered, apprentices tend to stay with an employer until they achieve Chartered status. Employers often highlighted that the support that they put in place during apprenticeships was also important to promoting staff loyalty at all levels.

*‘We tend to get a huge amount of loyalty from our apprentices. We work very hard to ensure the completion of their apprenticeships.’* – Large employer, engineering sector

## **Maintaining a pipeline**

Maintaining a pipeline of talent was a key reason for building apprenticeship progression routes for some employers, particularly those with more specialist or niche skills requirements. Employers within the IT and engineering sectors reported using apprenticeships to maintain a continuous talent pipeline as skilled employees retire. For example, one employer recruited engineers on a Level 3 Mechatronics standard to build a broad skill set, before providing further specialised training and progression opportunities within their company. This ensured that the employer always had the specific expertise needed as staff moved on or retired.

*‘We’ve been offering apprenticeships for so long, a lot of our staff are getting a lot older now, and we have a vast amount of experience that is starting to retire... It’s up to these young people to have an education in the workplace that will take over from these people that are leaving. That’s our motivation.’* – Large employer, engineering sector

## **Tradition of apprenticeships training**

Where there is a long tradition of using apprenticeships within industries, the requirements and training are familiar to staff leaders and senior managers. In these cases, line managers are more likely to understand the need for 20% off-the-job training, as well as the additional workloads involved in delivering apprenticeships. These employers were

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<sup>10</sup> The evidence gathered through interviews indicates that progression pathways through apprenticeships may not be as well developed in the IT sector. However, interviewees from this sector are underrepresented.

more confident in their ability to support employees progressing through apprenticeships for the duration of their programmes.

Within certain sectors, some employers reported that apprenticeships were a recognisable sign of quality to demonstrate their workforce's skills to their clients. For example, a global engineering and construction company reported using apprenticeships to demonstrate to clients that their employees' knowledge is up to date.

*'We want talented people in the business. A lot of them work on projects for clients, so we need to be able to demonstrate to the clients that they're knowledgeable and up-to-speed and have the skillset that they would expect. The [apprenticeship] qualification is obviously a measure of that.'* – Large employer, construction sector

However, the interviews also indicated that some employers may be motivated to offer apprenticeships purely to satisfy requirements for bidding opportunities. Two companies (a global engineering consultancy and a large construction company) ran large projects for the government which stipulated targets on apprentice numbers as part of the contract.

## **Barriers to employers offering apprenticeship progression pathways**

Employers, sector bodies and providers also reported a range of barriers which prevented employers from using apprenticeships as a progression pathway in their organisation. The main barriers reported were:

- Difficulties related to the content and funding rules of apprenticeships. This included challenges fulfilling occupational requirements of apprenticeship standards; standards not keeping up with industry changes; the minimum length of apprenticeships; and the 20% off-the-job requirement. This meant that some employers preferred to use internal training courses to support progression.
- Lack of availability of appropriate provision or standards. This included challenges in making apprenticeship cohorts financially viable for providers; provision which is not available locally; and standards still in development.
- Organisational barriers to progressing their staff, for example a lack of vacancies at more senior levels.

While these barriers varied according to sector, employer size was often regarded as having the most impact on an employer's ability to use apprenticeships to progress staff. Smaller employers may lack of job roles for apprentices to progress into, have less opportunity for apprentices to develop and demonstrate competencies required by the standards, and have less resource to manage the additional workload of implementing apprenticeships within their business.

## **Requirements of apprenticeship standards**

Some employers reported that apprenticeship standards act as a barrier to progression as they are more rigidly aligned to a current job role than the previous apprenticeship

frameworks<sup>11</sup>. For example, within leadership and management apprenticeships, respondents highlighted that employers are unable to prepare an employee to progress from Level 2 to Level 3 Team Leader if the employee does not have a large enough team to manage.

*'That's the conundrum with standards now. In the past, with apprenticeship frameworks, you could say, I'm going to take this person from a 2 to a 3, or a 3 to a Level 5. Now, because we've been directed to define occupations, the trickiness is to try to attract and select people who are almost perfect for that particular occupation, at that particular level. We're working through that, it's almost like one of those unintended consequences of having the system of standards.'* – Large employer, engineering sector

Providers and sector bodies reported that it is particularly challenging for SMEs to provide a role that matches the requirements of apprentice standards. For example, an Electrician apprenticeship standard requires a complex wiring competence. If an employer cannot cover the mandatory requirements within their company, they have to send their apprentice to another company to gain the experience for the competency.

SMEs are also less likely to have roles for employees to progress into due to the size of the organisation. Similarly, sector bodies reported a barrier in progressing apprentices in construction due to a shortage of vacancies at more senior levels.

*'SMEs...they call it, dead man's shoes progression, that would obviously cause an issue, because apprenticeship is about moving into the next job role, and if the next job role isn't there for them, then academic learning can't be done through an apprenticeship because you're not going to get the competency element through it.'* – Provider, FE college

### **Gaps in standards/progression pathways**

Employers, providers and sector bodies reported a decline in the number of apprenticeships at Level 2, which previously formed a progression route to Level 3 for individuals with lower qualification levels. In part, this is due to a lack of standards being available in some sectors or occupations. Interviewees cited more opportunities available at Level 2 in the construction sector, but a specific gap at Level 2 in the IT sector. The lack of Business Administration Level 2 standard was reported by employers as closing down a more generalist progression route for people with lower educational attainment. While some larger companies run training programmes for staff to prepare them for Level 3 apprenticeships, smaller employers were said to have limited resources for in-house training.

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<sup>11</sup> Apprenticeship frameworks were 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. From August 2020 all Apprenticeship starts are on standards.

Where Level standards exist, employers may still decide to start at Level 3. For example, engineering apprenticeships at larger companies were said to start at Level 3 as this reflects business need and the educational attainment of new recruits.

*'We don't have the roles in the business at that level. Also, there's no appetite... we've got Level 2 roles and it's been impossible to fill them'* – Large employer, engineering sector

Employers and providers reported 'gaps' in progression pathways, which are impacting on employers' ability to progress staff through apprenticeships. These gaps mean that the next available apprenticeship level requires a large jump in skills, knowledge and behaviours. One specialist leadership and management provider reported that this is preventing employers from using apprenticeships to progress staff due to the time it takes to upskill through additional training.

### **Length of programmes**

Employers in different sectors reported that the length of an apprenticeship<sup>12</sup> could be off-putting, and some preferred to use shorter internal and external training to develop their employees. The length of apprenticeships, particularly the higher-level apprenticeships, were also regarded by some respondents to cause difficulties as they were not sufficiently flexible to changing business needs or role requirements during this time. This was reported as a particular challenge by employers in sectors predicting developments in digital technology, such as Engineering and IT, which is particularly fast paced.

*'There needs to be some wiggle room for training people during the apprenticeship. It's a long time, four years is a long time, technology changes, people develop at different rates and the progression opportunities may arise.'* - Large employer, engineering sector

### **20% off-the-job training**

The requirement for 20% off-the-job training within an apprenticeship was reported as a barrier for employers. One manufacturing employer described how this element of apprenticeships is a key challenge in changing perceptions across the organisation, due to the cost of releasing people from production.

*'Overall, it does close down conversations quite quickly if we don't get the opportunity to talk around it and try make it work.'* – Large employer, manufacturing sector

Progression routes to higher levels within an organisation were seen as particularly affected by this. Some employers perceived that it would be cheaper to pay for shorter, alternative training without the off-the job element than 'lose' 20% of senior staff time. For example, the cost of backfilling time booked to projects when senior staff are away from work was mentioned by large and medium-sized construction companies and a global engineering and technology company.

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<sup>12</sup> The minimum length for an apprenticeship is 12 months

## **Shortage of provision and available standards**

Some sector bodies and employers reported that organisations with more specialist apprenticeship standards requirements have struggled to provide progression to higher-level apprenticeships because they cannot find high-quality providers locally. For example, employers working in manufacturing were said to have struggled to find providers, or high-quality providers, of engineering standards relevant to their industry. Other interviewees highlighted that low funding caps for certain standards have meant that they are not seen as commercially viable to deliver by training providers. Training providers who did deliver these standards reported changing their delivery methods, which could impact on the quality of provision. For example, one provider cited a reduction in the funding band for the Level 3 Business Administration apprenticeship means that they are unable to visit apprentices in the workplace. Furthermore, according to a higher education provider, most universities have decided not to deliver Level 6 Head of Facilities Management due to a funding cap of £18,000.

A further difficulty in sourcing the provision necessary to offer progression routes included employers being unable to provide an adequate cohort size for providers to run apprenticeships. This was reported as impacting SMEs who are likely to have smaller cohorts, as well as employers dispersed across the UK and based in more rural locations.

Employers and sector bodies also highlighted a range of standards currently in development, which they are waiting for to meet their staff development needs. These included replacements for popular frameworks, more higher-level standards and standards which reflect more niche sector needs. Examples cited by interviewees included:

- A lack of standards in some engineering occupations to replace frameworks. While some apprenticeship frameworks can be delivered up to July 2020, some training providers are no longer offering these because it is reportedly not financially viable for them to do so. For example, popular frameworks within certain industries, such as fabrication, welding and food engineering, were said to be no longer economically viable to deliver. Employers reported using generalist engineering apprenticeships in the interim or having to provide in-house training.
- A shortage of standards at higher levels (above Level 3) in a range of trades-based construction sectors, and process operators and technicians.

## **Ability to progress staff**

Employers, sector bodies and providers described employer barriers to progressing their staff. It was reported that some roles do not require training beyond Level 3. This was particularly the case for those completing Level 3 Electrician, Business Administration and IT apprenticeships. In some cases, this also related to an employer's ability to progress staff, for example if there are no vacancies in higher-level roles.

*'Somebody who's done a Level 3 and they're now a first line support technician, if they progress them to do a degree, they're going to have to be able to give them other*

*elements of work... to prove competency in the workplace through their apprenticeship. Which means you're having to fill that person's post to become first line support, but actually there isn't a need... you just don't need them to progress.' – Sector body, IT sector*

In addition, some employers might not be able to allow their employees to progress because they do not have a pipeline of talent to backfill vacant posts. For example, in some building trades, such as carpentry and bricklaying, employers and providers reported that there could be a shortage of people entering to replace candidates if they progressed.

*'Where we've got shortage areas, for instance, bricklayers and carpenters, then they actually can't afford for them to progress away from being on the trowel and on the site, because there aren't enough people to replace them.' – Provider, FE college.*

Similarly, a finance sector body reported that some apprentices on the AAT (Association of Accounting Technicians) pathway who want to progress to Level 4 are being held in their roles by employers due to business needs.

### **Improving apprenticeship progression routes**

Employers, providers and sector bodies highlighted some suggestions that they thought would improve their ability to provide progression within their organisations, including:

- Supporting employers to map apprenticeship progression through standards in sectors without established, recognised or obvious pathways. Some employers may lack the resources to spend time navigating or planning career pathways through the new apprenticeship standards.
- Maintaining stable funding for providers and reviewing funding caps for key standards which could support progression. Some interviewees said that changes in funding caps since the apprenticeship levy was introduced has caused financial pressures for providers and impacted on the viability of offering some standards.
- Addressing SME barriers by providing more support with funding, highlighting options such as levy transfers, aligning apprenticeships standards to roles in SME-dominated sectors and involving SMEs more in developing standards. One suggestion included providing SME apprentices with work experience at another employer, for example through linking small employers with large employers or including work-based simulations at providers.

# Apprentice experiences of progression

This chapter primarily draws on apprentices' experiences of progression. It explores their motivations for progressing through apprenticeships, the outcomes achieved and the factors which had an impact on their experiences and future prospects. It concludes by reviewing their suggestions for overcoming barriers to apprenticeship progression.

## Key chapter findings

- Apprentices' definitions of progression included: securing a promotion; enhancing their job performance; accreditation of skills at a higher level; and increasing their pay. They sought to fulfil these by completing one or multiple apprenticeships.
- Interviewees of all ages perceived apprenticeships to be an attractive alternative to higher education, which enabled them to develop their skills during working hours, while earning.
- To ensure their programme provided new learning to support their progression, apprentices stressed the importance of an accurate assessment of prior learning.
- The quality of support from their provider and employer was key to apprentices' experiences of their programmes and their progression prospects. Wider circumstances such as poor health or caring responsibilities, as well as low apprenticeship wages could have a negative impact on experiences and outcomes.
- Progression achieved by apprentices included securing a promotion or accreditation of skills at a higher level. Apprentices also reported increased confidence and clearer career goals which were thought to improve their longer-term progression prospects.
- Some apprentices did not want to progress further due to job satisfaction or personal circumstances, whereas others were constrained by the lack of opportunity to do so with their current employer, or by the availability of higher-level apprenticeships locally.
- Apprentices said that apprenticeships need to be more widely promoted as a means of progression in schools, colleges and businesses, as well as to the general population. Raising the apprentice wage and incentivising employers to progress their staff were also suggested to enable more people to progress through apprenticeships.
- Apprentices also suggested actions which could be taken by providers and employers to ensure that apprenticeships support progression. These included ensuring a thorough prior learning assessment, regular contact between the provider, apprentice and employer to address support needs and the provision of careers advice.

## Apprentice motivations

Apprentices had different definitions of 'progression' including securing a permanent employment position or promotion; improving their competence at work; accreditation of

skills at a higher level; and gaining a higher salary. Some apprentices wanted to progress in their existing roles, whereas others were keen to progress into a new sector or role with improved financial prospects and/or benefits such as job security, job satisfaction and a better work-life balance. Completing an apprenticeship, and in some cases progressing through multiple levels, helped to meet their individual ambitions.

This section explores the main motivations of apprentices to progress. These are grouped into benefits related to employment, finances and learning.

### **Employment prospects**

There was a universal view that the on- and off-the-job training would enable apprentices to secure the job they wanted when they completed. Apprentices who were existing staff prior to starting their programme thought that completing an apprenticeship would put them in a stronger position to progress by securing a promotion or a change in role.

Those recruited to the business as apprentices often aspired to start a role which offered career progression in a certain sector. Interviewees considered that apprenticeships were highly valued by employers as they demonstrate occupational competence and work experience. This was particularly evident in trades such as electricians or mechanics, where an apprenticeship could be a mandatory requirement. A further motivation was the ability to learn while working, providing a quicker means of progression than higher education. This motivation was cited both by younger career starters and older apprentices who wanted to change careers.

*'I thought that the apprenticeship would be the better choice for me because even if I got a university degree, my end goal would still be the same. I am doing what I want but three years earlier.'* - Current apprentice, Level 4

Apprenticeships were regarded as helpful to those who were less certain of their career path. They emphasised the short- and longer-term benefits of apprenticeships in comparison to the risk of dropping out from an expensive university course or entering a 'dead end' job with few learning opportunities. These apprentices chose to access standards that were relevant to a range of job roles and sectors, such as Business Administration, to keep their options for progression open.

*'My heart wasn't set on university so I couldn't really spend the money when I wasn't sure... I thought an apprenticeship might lead onto better things so I could work my way up that route rather than just going straight into a full-time job.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

### **Financial security**

The opportunity to earn an income while learning and the prospect of increased income on completion were key motivations for apprentices. Securing higher earnings was also a longer-term ambition and some apprentices had taken an initial pay cut to change their career and improve their future progression and earning potential.

Apprenticeships provided a way to access skills development for people at different stages of their life and careers. Younger apprentices explained that, by progressing their career through apprenticeships, they could access higher earnings earlier than peers who went to university.

Apprentices who were employed at their organisation prior to starting their programme were attracted by the opportunity to continue earning while developing their skills. This was often compared to other types of learning which had to be self-financed or would require them to reduce their hours or leave a full-time job.

*'The fact that I could work and also attend college without picking between the two...was the deal breaker for me.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

Parents who wanted to progress their career when their children had started school said apprenticeships helped them to manage this financially, as they could receive income support and tax credits.

*'A lot of parents want a qualification to get a job, but they can't [because] with university and college you don't get income support and tax credits, but [you do] with an apprenticeship, because you're working over 30 hours.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

### **Continuing learning**

Apprentices cited the ability to learn within working hours as a key motivation for choosing to progress through apprenticeships. Undertaking training with minimal impact on personal time outside of work was particularly appealing for apprentices with dependent children. Some parents highlighted the importance of maintaining normal working hours, rather than doing a part-time evening or weekend job to fit around studying.

For those who preferred to learn in a work-based context, apprenticeships opened up progression routes by providing hands-on learning. Apprentices who reported negative experiences of academic teaching and learning found apprenticeships a more motivating option for skills development than a college or university course. They explained that apprenticeships enabled them to learn information that they could immediately put into practice to enhance their performance at work.

### **How opportunities were promoted**

Apprentices mostly heard about options to progress through apprenticeships from employers or training providers. They highlighted the importance of hearing about these opportunities from a trusted source. While all apprentices were aware that apprenticeships could enable them to progress in work, not all apprentices knew about the different levels available and the ability to progress through them. Current apprentices interviewed were more often aware of the breadth of opportunities on offer than those who had completed their programmes. This could reflect the expansion in the range of apprenticeship standards and levels offered in recent years.

## Employers promoting apprenticeship progression

Apprentices who were employed at their organisation prior to starting their programme often became aware of apprenticeship opportunities from their employer. They highlighted the role of individual managers in their decision to progress by starting an apprenticeship. Line managers promising support gave apprentices greater confidence in their ability to complete the programme alongside their existing role responsibilities.

Interviewees said that employers with apprenticeship vacancies and established progression routes tended to proactively promote these and encourage staff to take up the opportunity. These tended to be larger employers. In contrast, apprentices employed by smaller organisations often described more ad-hoc encounters with their line managers, for example, in discussions about their training needs. These apprentices also tended to be aware of the specific opportunity available, rather than a full progression pathway.

Some apprentices reported finding out about their apprenticeship by chance when applying for a job with their employer. These apprentices sometimes regretted not being aware of apprenticeships before, as they could have pursued opportunities with greater potential for progression, for example in larger employers or different sectors.

## Providers promoting apprenticeship progression

Some apprentices said that their decision to take up an apprenticeship was strongly influenced by a member of college or school staff who spoke to them individually about their aspirations. Most of these apprentices explained that this initial discussion was brief. They said that due to the lack of wider promotion in their school or college, they were required to undertake additional research themselves to find out more about how apprenticeships could support them to progress their career.

Apprentices reported becoming aware of the option to progress through apprenticeship levels from their training provider. Some providers enabled progression through automatic enrolment to higher level programmes. Having the same provider for successive apprenticeships reassured apprentices of their ability to provide support.

*'They already know you, they've seen your work ... they know what your requirements are and you've built that relationship with them. Having the same one for Level three... It wasn't like starting anew it was, like, just carrying on.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

## Factors influencing progression

Apprentices highlighted factors which influenced their experiences while on programme and their ability to progress from and through apprenticeships. These included:

- The assessment of prior learning, which determines whether the apprenticeship provides the right level of learning for apprentices to progress.
- The quality of support from the apprenticeship provider and employer to help apprentices to maximise the on- and off-the-job learning.

- Low pay rates, allowed through the apprenticeship minimum wage rate, which influence the extent to which apprenticeship progression is an attractive, or viable, option.
- The level of English and maths support available, which impacts on the ability and willingness of some individuals to start an apprenticeship, or progress to the next level.
- Apprentices' wider circumstances, which can affect their ability to manage their programme or progress in work.
- The relevance of apprenticeships to their career aspirations.
- The progression opportunities available in their role.

### Assessment of prior learning

Apprenticeship guidance states that prior to an apprenticeship start, the training provider must assess the individual's prior learning and adapt the programme accordingly.<sup>13</sup> However, experiences of prior learning assessment were not consistent among apprentices interviewed and some did not recall the assessment taking place.

A thorough assessment of prior learning often had a positive impact on apprentice's experience as it ensured they accessed the appropriate level to support their progression. All higher-level apprentices interviewed remembered being asked about their knowledge, skills and experience. In some cases, they were asked about specific aspects of the course content or responsibilities in previous job roles. The most positive accounts were from apprentices who reported learning being tailored throughout the apprenticeship to meet their needs.

Most apprentices who progressed through multiple levels said that providers took their prior learning into account in their most recent apprenticeship. This was often attributed to the providers having a good understanding of the content of their previous programme, particularly if they also had delivered this.

*'They gave me the documents of what units I could pick from and said I could bring forward certain units so that I didn't have to do them again.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

In contrast, some apprentices believed that they started apprenticeships at a lower level than their capabilities, based on their previous qualification level or work experience. These apprentices said their programme was 'too easy' and described repeating learning, which could delay their career progression. This was reported by apprentices who accessed Level 2 and Level 3 programmes.

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<sup>13</sup> Education and Skills Funding Agency (2019) [\*Apprenticeships: initial assessment to recognise prior learning\*](#).

*'What I've done so far [a Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeship], I've done that for years. It just feels like I've just redone my last six years of work.'* – Current apprentice, Level 3

Where apprentices applied for vacancies advertised by employers at a particular level, they assumed that there was no flexibility to tailor the level to account for prior learning. These apprentices either did not recall the prior learning assessment or thought it did not impact the level of apprenticeship.

*'It was just advertised for the level it's advertised at. There weren't any choices... I've done Level 2 and Level 3 at college... but it's just general that people just start off on Level 2 anyway. So, you just don't say anything'* – Recent apprentice, Level 2

In some cases, apprentices were content to access a slightly lower level apprenticeship if they felt this supported their progression aims. Apprentices who were seeking to change career were satisfied if the programme contained new learning and enabled them to access a certain sector. Some interviewees who joined their employer as an apprentice also reported being sufficiently challenged by a lower level apprenticeship due to managing the demands of a new job role at the same time as training.

*'If you were to just focus solely on that apprenticeship work, I'd have probably wanted a bit more of a push [but]...I was learning on the job at the same time. I'd come straight from school, it was definitely enough. I was challenged enough.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

### **Quality of delivery and support from providers**

The quality of support from tutors was important to support apprentices' progression. Apprentices' definitions of effective support included regular face to face meetings; clear information on course content; and good quality training resources and tuition.

Apprentices felt less supported to progress in their apprenticeship when providers were not responsive to their communication or did not provide constructive feedback. Poor quality communication was reported by some apprentices who were not required to attend the provider's site. Apprentices also valued opportunities to engage with other apprentices to share experiences and learn from one another, to improve their competence in their role. They were less able to access these opportunities when the tutor visited the apprentice in the workplace, or the apprentice undertook distance learning.

Apprentices valued learning from knowledgeable tutors and access to high-quality resources. Apprentices also appreciated being able to request additional support in areas where they felt less confident. Some apprentices on new standards or in their provider's first cohorts reported tutors lacking knowledge of the programme requirements. A lack of direction from tutors about expectations of assignments, or end point assessments (EPA)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Apprentices must complete an independent assessment at the end of the programme to confirm that they can demonstrate the knowledge, skills and behaviours in the apprenticeship standard.

resulted in some apprentices feeling underconfident in their ability to complete, and progress from their apprenticeship.

*'I said through the whole thing I wasn't really sure what the end point assessment was really about...I didn't really understand the structure of what was going to happen.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

Apprentices said that the quality of communication between their employer and provider was crucial to a positive experience on-programme. When providers and employers operated separately and did not communicate, apprentices felt unable to raise an issue which could impact their ability to complete or progress from their apprenticeship.

### **Employer support**

The level of employer support significantly influenced apprentices' experiences on their programme and their confidence in their ability to progress. Overall, apprentices from larger employers reported receiving a higher level of support than those from SMEs.

Apprentices benefitted from regular check-ins with their line managers throughout their apprenticeship. This made them feel that their employer wanted to help them to gain the most out of the apprenticeship opportunity and was invested in their progression.

Apprentices in junior roles, and those who joined their employer as apprentices particularly highlighted the importance of regular meetings with their manager. These were beneficial when they focussed on the apprentice's progress, identifying any additional support needs and facilitating exposure to work experiences that were relevant to their learning.

*'If you spoke to them and said, 'I need more time to do this,' or, 'Can I do this type of work,' to get a better example and use it in the coursework, [my employer was] more than happy to adjust what they were doing.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 4

In contrast, a lack of employer support hindered apprentices' ability to progress and was the main factor in apprenticeship drop-out among those interviewed. These apprentices were all younger and on Level 2 and 3 programmes. Poor employer support included not asking what they were learning on programme, what work experience they needed to gain, or assigning menial tasks that did not promote their learning. This resulted in limited skills development from the on-the-job learning provided by their apprenticeship, which constrained their progression.

The most commonly cited challenge when completing an apprenticeship was managing studying while working full time. Apprentices who were employed at their organisation prior to undertaking their programme said that support to manage their workload and 20% off-the-job learning was particularly important. Some apprentices reported that their employer did not allow them to take the 20% off-the-job training time due to understaffing. This resulted in increased pressure on them to complete their apprenticeship requirements in their own time. In contrast, apprentices who were proactively supported by their managers to manage their workload and study felt more likely to succeed and progress.

*'My line manager and [their manager]...are very good with helping me manage my workload, and they constantly check on me to make sure that I feel okay and I'm handling it okay and it's not too much'* – Current apprentice, Level 4

Apprentices expressed the importance of their employer setting a positive workplace culture. Apprentices at all levels benefitted from supportive colleagues who were mindful of their apprenticeship commitments and invested in their progression. The opportunity to shadow various roles and speak to a range of staff in the organisation was valued by new starters. This helped them to clarify where they would like to progress in future.

### **Apprentice pay**

Low apprenticeship pay was a particular barrier for some older apprentices who wanted to change career. They said that their financial responsibilities prevented them from accessing some apprenticeships with good progression prospects.

*'Some of them that are advertised are really relevant to me, but I can't take the wage drop. If I were offered it in school or college, it would have been more beneficial. I would have taken it then, but now, I can't do it.'* - Current apprentice, Level 3

The low apprenticeship wage was also described as a challenge by apprentices at the beginning of their career, who were on lower level programmes. This was particularly challenging for those who had completed successive apprenticeships but remained on a low wage for the duration of their programmes.

### **English and maths requirements**

Providers and employers highlighted instances where individuals who wanted to progress through apprenticeships were prevented from doing so if they had not achieved Level 2 English and maths or they could not provide evidence of attainment. Apprentices' attitudes towards English and maths were also cited as a barrier to progression. This was raised by interviewees in certain sectors, such as construction, which traditionally may not require English and maths qualifications. Interviewees said that some people may be prevented from progressing to a Level 3 if they do not want to take English and maths during their Level 2 apprenticeship.

*'We generally aim to...put them back through the GCSEs, but some of them just don't want to do that, so they'll probably do a Level 2 apprenticeship. They will never move on to do a Level 3 because of the maths and English.'* – Provider, FE college

Some apprentices interviewed found the functional skills element to be the main challenge on-programme, particularly when they did not see these qualifications as relevant to their career progression. Balancing the apprenticeship role, study and additional functional skills could be difficult to manage and complete in the allocated time.

*'It was an hour a week of maths ...an hour a week isn't going to stay in my head. The tutor wanted us to do work at home too but I was too tired'* – Recent apprentice, Level 2

One provider reported that those with lower-level English language skills could find it difficult to progress through apprenticeships. Level 3 apprenticeships require a good level of writing ability, so English language support is required to enable progression from Level 2.

### **Balancing apprenticeships with wider commitments**

Employers and providers said that apprentices can find it challenging to progress through apprenticeships alongside other commitments. Older apprentices are more likely to have additional responsibilities at home, such as childcare. Managing the study requirements and job role could also be challenging for apprentices who had an existing workload prior to beginning their programme. When employers did not provide support with managing the 20% off-the-job training, apprentices with wider commitments found it difficult to balance their responsibilities for the required length of their apprenticeship. This could constrain their ability to successfully complete their programmes and progress in their role.

*'Probably two thirds of our apprentices have now got families, we've got some apprentices who will be carers and have elderly relatives to look after. So, at different stages in their careers very often it's factors outside of the workplace as well that's influencing them and how much further they feel they can go on'* – Provider, higher education institution

Apprentices said that their experience of managing their workload alongside other commitments influenced their decision to progress on to a further apprenticeship. When an apprenticeship had been particularly time-consuming or challenging to manage, apprentices reported 'study fatigue' and a reluctance to progress to a higher level programme. Wider circumstances such as illness, caring responsibilities or family life were cited as reasons for taking a break from apprenticeships. These apprentices did not feel able to access a further apprenticeship until their personal circumstances had stabilised.

### **Relevance of apprenticeship to career aspirations**

Some apprentices reported that progression did not align with their career aspirations. These apprentices said that progressing to a higher level programme, or progressing in work, would require doing a role they did not aspire to do.

*'I know myself that you could progress to a Level 3, but I didn't really consider it.... I just thought about the permanent job.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 2

Some providers said that remaining in their current role rather than progressing into management can provide more financial benefit to individuals in some sectors. This was because technical skills may be in demand more than transferable skills like management.

*'If I've got somebody in a junior site manager role, they might be earning £18,000 a year. A bricklayer in Birmingham right now is earning £1,500 a week.'* – Provider, FE college

Some apprentices did not see the value in undertaking further apprenticeships if they could achieve their career goals through other means. This depended on the types of training and development opportunities offered by their organisation.

*'The idea of the next step of the apprenticeship would be to get a promotion. But if they would give me one without it then there wouldn't be much point doing the next one'* – Current apprentice, Level 4

### Opportunities available

The apprenticeship standards available could constrain progression. Some apprentices reported being limited by a lack of higher-level apprenticeships locally.

*'I'd done Level 3 at college...but Level 3 was the only option to get into an employer where I live, because there aren't many around. The level of work was, how can I describe it, I don't want to say too easy, but it wasn't really testing me'* – Current apprentice, Level 6

Apprentices could also be constrained by the progression opportunities available at their organisation. Some apprentices were unable to progress when their current employer did not require an employee at a higher level or did not have the funding available to support a higher-level apprentice. This was particularly prevalent within smaller organisations.

*'I kept asking, 'What's happening afterwards? I'd like to move forward... so I could be Level 4, Level 5 qualified. I did put that to work numerous times...[but] they said 'We don't need anyone at that level.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

Apprentices who could not access further progression with their employer had to consider whether to leave to fulfil their career goals. Not all apprentices were willing to leave their organisation, and some chose to self-fund higher education instead.

Apprentices could also be constrained by the progression available to them in a certain sector or role. Some apprentices reported a 'ceiling' for progression and a need to consider changing careers to access further learning and progression opportunities.

In some cases, the next available apprenticeship level required a large jump in the skills and knowledge. This meant that more senior roles were not immediately accessible, and apprentices said that they needed substantially more work experience before they could qualify for the next level of apprenticeship, or stage in their career.

### Progression outcomes

Apprentices reported progression outcomes as a result of completing their programme. These included:

- A permanent position in the sector they wanted, or a promotion, at a higher wage.
- Progression on to a further apprenticeship, or other forms of learning, at a higher level.

These outcomes were not always guaranteed upon completion. Some apprentices reported having to make the case to their employer, or leave their apprentice employer, to progress. However, these apprentices agreed that the on-the-job learning provided them with relevant skills and insight which provided an advantage over other candidates. Some apprentices who had completed Level 3 or Level 4 apprenticeships said that they were

able to access jobs at their organisation that were normally given only to graduates. They felt the work experience gained from their apprenticeship had enabled them to prove their competence to their employer despite not having a degree. Therefore, apprenticeships provided a quicker, inexpensive and effective means of progressing their careers.

### **Increased long term employability**

Younger apprentices said that learning how to behave at work, including developing communication skills and managing responsibility, was the main way that apprenticeships had enhanced their employability. They said that the work-based skills developed through on-the-job learning improved their progression prospects in comparison to training courses.

*'When I first started [with my employer], I didn't want to answer the phone and things, because you've been at school and sixth form and you really get thrown into the deep end. Now my confidence has improved no end.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

Apprentices reported becoming more proficient in their job role as the knowledge and skills gained on their programmes informed their professional practice. Apprenticeships also provided a broader, more holistic understanding of their sector, which apprentices felt would improve their longer-term prospects.

### **Clearer career goals**

Apprentices said that their training helped them to better understand their strengths and the types of work they enjoyed. This informed their career plans and future progression. Apprentices who were employed in large employers said that an exposure to a breadth of job roles provided greater clarity on the career path they wanted to take. Some apprentices who did not initially plan to progress chose to follow a specialised career path through apprenticeship levels as a result of their experiences.

*'It's made me realise my potential and what I could do.'* – Recent apprentice, Level 5

### **Improved self-confidence**

Most apprentices reflected that their apprenticeship had increased their self-confidence. This was particularly evident among older apprentices who had not engaged with formal learning for a long time. Some of these apprentices had previously considered themselves as being too old to access skills development or progress in their careers but were now keen to progress further.

*'Just knowing I can still do it, that's been quite a positive for me, knowing that, at my age, I can still get these qualifications or can pursue a career.'* – Current apprentice, Level 3

### **Improving apprenticeship progression**

Apprentices had several suggestions to improve apprenticeship progression by increasing access to these opportunities and providing support to apprentices to help them progress.

## Improving access to apprenticeship progression opportunities

The suggestions to improve access to apprenticeship progression included awareness raising, increasing the opportunities available and raising the apprentice minimum wage.

### Raising awareness of apprenticeships

Most apprentices said that there was a lack of promotion and information about the progression routes available through apprenticeships in comparison to higher education. They said it was important to raise awareness of apprenticeships which support progression and how these can help people to achieve their career ambitions.

Apprentices suggested greater promotion of apprenticeship progression routes within schools, colleges and businesses. They said that people who had progressed through apprenticeships would be a trustworthy source of information, as they could provide first-hand experiences.

Interviewees highlighted the need to raise awareness about how apprenticeships enable progression to the wider adult population, including people considering a career change. Some apprentices said that while they had seen messaging about apprenticeships as an alternative to university, progressing through apprenticeships was less widely promoted.

*'In advertising campaigns and promotional videos ...there needs to be a bit more focus on how you can progress with them...It would be quite useful if people know that, yes, it is an alternative [to university], but you can also progress'* – Current apprentice, Level 4

*'Promoting how successful you can be from the apprenticeship path, how easy it is to go up the levels...if that was promoted more, people would be more open to them'* – Recent apprentice, Level 3

Apprentices suggested that certain aspects should be promoted to dispel myths and encourage adults to consider apprenticeships to progress their careers including:

- The range of apprenticeship opportunities that can be accessed by people of all ages and stages in their career.
- The ability to progress through levels to access higher-level apprenticeships and information about potential pay increases.
- The level of responsibility and parity of status with colleagues, to provide reassurance that an apprentice at any career stage would be respected in the workplace.
- Details of financial support available, including how benefit entitlements are affected.
- The types of support available from the provider with studying and support from their employer to manage balancing their workload with apprenticeship training.

Interviewees said that they would benefit from a centralised source of information which clearly details career progression routes in different sectors and explains how

apprenticeships can form part of career pathways. It was suggested that this should also include information about how their existing learning will be accounted for, and the further learning they will be able to access after completing apprenticeships.

### **Increasing the supply of apprenticeships**

Apprentices felt that encouraging employers to offer apprenticeships to progress their staff was crucial to improving access to progression opportunities. They suggested the need for incentives or funding for smaller employers to offer higher-level apprenticeships.

### **Raising apprenticeship pay**

Apprentices said that increasing the apprentice wage would encourage more individuals to progress through apprenticeships. There was a view that the apprenticeship wage was too low, particularly for older apprentices with greater financial responsibilities, and that this is a barrier to progression through apprenticeships for those with no other sources of income.

### **Improving on-programme support**

Apprentices' suggestions to support apprenticeship progression included actions to be taken prior to the apprenticeship, during the programme and following completion.

#### **Prior to the apprenticeship**

Prior to apprenticeship start, interviewees suggested that it is important to ensure that:

- Apprentices have an honest discussion with their employer and/or provider about the progression opportunities available following the apprenticeship. This should include the eligibility criteria for higher-level apprenticeships, whether there was a guaranteed job on completion, likely progression opportunities available and changes to salary.

*'It would have been helpful to have more information...if you wanted to progress what you could go on to do...what role it would give you in the end...what support you could be given ... would the pay change?' – Recent apprentice, Level 3*

- Apprentices are provided with information at the outset of their apprenticeship about the course content, on-the-job training and what to expect from the end point assessment. This should also include information about the support available from their employer and provider to help them complete their apprenticeship and maintain a focus on their progression.
- A thorough assessment of prior learning takes place to ensure that the programme supports skills development and apprentices do not repeat learning. This may involve workplace observations and feedback from managers.

#### **During the apprenticeship**

Interviewees suggested that ensuring access to support from their employer and provider during the apprenticeship would improve progression outcomes. This included:

- Employers conducting regular meetings with apprentices to ensure that they are taking 20% of time for off-the-job training and are assigned work that supports them to develop the necessary skills to progress.
- Supporting apprentices to learn from one another through peer support. If apprentices are not required to attend the provider site, this could require providers to organise events or forums for apprentices to meet one another and discuss their work.
- Employers and providers keeping in regular communication to ensure that employers understand how to support apprentices in a way which maximises their on- and off-the-job learning. There should also be a clear route to raise issues with the provider or employer confidentially if apprentices are experiencing any problems with the other party.

### **Following the apprenticeship**

All apprentices highlighted the importance of information, support and encouragement to progress. Apprentices who completed their programme said that it was important for careers advice to be provided before, during and following the apprenticeship. Apprentices who had withdrawn or suspended their programme also said that they would appreciate providers following up to offer information and support about their alternative options.

It was recommended that careers advice is made available through their provider. This is particularly important if the employer cannot offer a progression opportunity. It was recommended that this should take the form of targeted information about their programme and further options available, with access to one-to-one discussion to explore their potential next steps.

## Conclusion

This report presents findings from qualitative research with sector bodies, employers, providers and apprentices to explore the enabling factors and barriers to progression from and through apprenticeships. It should be noted that the research focused on organisations operating in 'high value' sectors<sup>15</sup>, and those which have established progression pathways through apprenticeships, so may not be indicative of employer behaviour more widely.

The research found employers had a range of motivations to offer apprenticeships as a progression pathway in their organisation. Some employers reported that the apprenticeship levy was a catalyst for expanding their apprenticeships offer. There was evidence of employers using apprenticeships more strategically to meet current and future staff development needs within their organisation. This included implementing clear progression routes in roles such as engineering and accountancy, from Levels 2 and 3 up to Levels 6 and 7. Employers highlighted benefits of offering apprenticeship progression pathways to increase retention and staff loyalty, and to maintain a pipeline of talent.

Apprentices' definitions of progression included securing a promotion; improving their competence at work; accreditation of skills at a higher level; or changing their career. Interviewees reflected that apprenticeships can represent an attractive alternative to higher education, as they do not require individuals to finance their own skills development. Apprenticeships also enable individuals to engage in education while at work, rather than in their own time, and provide relevant and practical learning for their career. These motivations for progressing through apprenticeships are relevant to different groups of apprentices, including those looking to progress in their role or access a new sector, and those at different life stages.

However, there are barriers which prevent some employers from offering progression through apprentices and some potential apprentices from benefiting from this. Employer barriers include a combination of difficulties in offering apprenticeships more generally, and employer practices regarding staff progression. SMEs were most likely to experience difficulties on both counts. Smaller businesses may lack roles for apprentices to progress to; less opportunities to develop competencies required by standards; and less resource to manage the additional workload of implementing apprenticeships within their business.

Current and recent apprentices reported that there is limited promotion of apprenticeships as a viable pathway in schools and colleges. Apprentices were most likely to hear about specific apprenticeship opportunities from employers or training providers, rather than responding to positive messages about apprenticeship progression more widely. This highlights that apprentices' choices may be unnecessarily constrained due to a lack of

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<sup>15</sup> High value sectors are those where apprenticeships provide higher than average earning potential, (based on individual wage returns having completed an apprenticeship).

awareness of any wider progression opportunities available in a range of sectors and employers.

The experiences that apprentices have while on their programme also impacts their ability to progress. Interviewees stressed the importance of apprentices accessing the right level of apprenticeship to support their progression, and that this is underpinned by an effective assessment of prior learning. The support from their employer and provider is also essential, as it enables apprentices to complete their programme having maximised their on- and off-the-job learning. Finally, apprentices' experiences and progression can be greatly affected by wider circumstances, such as difficulties completing the English and maths component, caring responsibilities and financial responsibilities.

Securing immediate progression in the form of a promotion or securing a permanent role was a common outcome for apprentices interviewed. Apprenticeships also resulted in a range of improvements which increase future prospects and employability, including improved confidence, efficiency, communication and clearer career goals. However, apprentices' longer-term plans were mixed and dependent on individual circumstances, employer decision making and the specific job role or sector. Progression from or through apprenticeships may not suit individual plans for personal reasons, a decision to focus on other priorities or an enjoyment of a current role. Progression can also be constrained by the opportunities available within an employer, a local area, or in a role. Apprentices can therefore face difficult decisions to balance their ambitions with the benefits of remaining in a situation which can meet other needs, such as family life or work-life balance. Improving the provision of information and expanding the opportunities available would enable apprenticeship progression to become a more accessible and beneficial option for a range of people.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

The findings highlight a range of factors which currently facilitate and constrain progression through apprenticeships. To improve apprenticeship progression, it is necessary to address barriers to both the supply and demand of opportunities.

- Many of the barriers experienced by employers relate to their ability or willingness to offer apprenticeships in general. This included a lack of capacity to become familiar the apprenticeships funding system and negative perceptions of the 20% off-the-job training requirement. DfE or the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) should disseminate clear information and practical guidance on how to use the apprenticeship levy and digital apprenticeships service. Case study examples should also be shared to illustrate good practice and a range of options for delivering the off-the-job component.
- Addressing barriers experienced by SMEs is key to improve access to progression, particularly in sectors and geographical areas which are predominantly comprised of smaller businesses. DfE and IfATE should ensure that information about accessing

levy transfers is shared with SMEs. In addition, guidance should be produced to make clear how smaller organisations can overcome barriers, such as working with other local employers for apprentices to develop and demonstrate competencies, where these opportunities are not available at their employer.

- To support progression, employers and apprentices need to be aware of potential progression routes for different occupations and career paths. DfE or IfATE, with the support of sector bodies, should produce information tailored to sectors, mapping progression options through standards. This should make clear where it may be possible for apprentices to skip levels rather than complete each sequentially, for example, progressing straight from Level 3 to Level 5. Materials could be disseminated to employers by trusted organisations, such as Federation of Small Businesses or Chambers of Commerce, and shared with potential apprentices through careers guidance services and the Find an apprenticeship website.
- Employers reported a lack of local or high-quality provision, particularly in specialist occupations. Training providers should proactively engage with employers to better understand their requirements and shape provision around these business needs. The government should also ensure apprenticeship funding is sufficient to support high-quality niche provision.
- Apprentices reported a lack of promotion of opportunities from schools and colleges. Schools and colleges should ensure that apprenticeships, and the potential career progression they offer, should be actively and equally promoted alongside other options. This promotion could involve linking with local employers to raise awareness of opportunities or hearing from apprentices who have progressed their careers.
- Promotion of apprenticeships should be supported by high quality careers information, advice and guidance, which should be available to individuals before, during and at the end of their programme. This can be delivered by schools, colleges, training providers through the employer and/or wider services such as the National Careers Service.
- The research highlighted that individuals with additional responsibilities to manage, such as health conditions, caring responsibilities and family life, currently face additional challenges in progressing through apprenticeships. Training providers and employers should work together to increase the availability of part-time apprenticeships, which could ensure a wider proportion of people can access these opportunities.

## Appendix 1

### Provider sample frame

Total	Sectors represented				Provider type		
	Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	ICT	Business, Finance and Law	Further education college	Independent training provider	Higher education institution
10	6	4	2	6	6	3	1

### Employer sample frame

Total	Sectors represented				Employer size	
	Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	ICT	Business, Finance and Law	SME <sup>16</sup>	Large
8	8	5	1	4	1	7

<sup>16</sup> This research uses the definition of SME as a business with less than 250 employees.

## Sector body sample frame

Total	Sectors represented			
	Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	ICT	Business, Finance and Law
5	2	2	2	4

## Apprentice sample – 2015/16 – 2017/18 cohort and 2018/19 cohort

Cohort	Age		Gender		Apprenticeship level			English regions represented	Total
	Under 25	Over 25	Female	Male	Intermediate (Level 2)	Advanced (Level 3)	Higher (Level 4+)		
2015/16 – 2017/18	2	2	5	3	3	4	1	7/9	8
2018/19	6	6	6	6	4	4	4	9/9	12