

Attitudes towards learning among former apprentices who progress to higher education

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SRHE Newer Researchers Award Final Report

1 Executive summary-nature of the project, main approaches taken and main conclusions reached.

This project explored the attitudes to learning of former apprentices who had progressed to higher education. Nineteen in depth interviews were completed with former apprentices in the South of England. The results were analysed with reference to features of reflexivity as described by Archer (2007) as well as learning preferences. Most respondents demonstrated strong autonomous reflexivity traits but it was clear that reflexivities overlapped in different ways. For example, a number of respondents drew upon autonomous and communicative reflexivity to suit their circumstances. There was a strong relationship between reflexivity and attitudes to learning and in particular, autonomous reflexives tended to be independent learners. However, a number of additional factors mediated this association. For example, the higher education environment and the employer relationship were found to shape reflexivity and attitudes to learning. To avoid what Archer describes as 'false starts' and to encourage learning to be fully appreciated, this report concludes that employers provide more space and time for employees to be reflexive. There are also specific recommendations concerning the quality and appropriateness of information provided for former apprentices looking to progress to higher education.

2 Summary of project aims and objectives

The research aim was to investigate the attitudes of learning among those who undertake a higher education qualification following an apprenticeship. 'Apprenticeship' is used to refer to training based on a combination of work-based and theoretical learning funded (to differing degrees) by the Government. In order to achieve this aim, the objectives were to explore:

- the transition from an apprenticeship to higher education;
- attitudes towards learning during transition;
- the impact of transition on attitudes towards learning.

The theoretical approach underpinning this research was the realist social theory developed by Archer (2007). This approach addresses the interplay between agency and social structure, highlighting the role that individual reflexivity plays in mediating the effects of social structure on the capacity to pursue action. The decision to use this approach was also in response to the suggestions by Kahn (2012) and Gorard and Smith (2007) that structural and cultural factors can engender particular attitudes towards learning.

3 Outline of methodology and project timetable

The sample for this study consisted of nineteen individuals located in the south of England. They worked in three broad sectors: computer science, engineering and

childcare and the majority worked in engineering (15). The institutions in which they were studying include two further education colleges, one pre-1992 university and four post-1992 universities. The majority of participants were in their 20s (17) and male (15). The sample was relatively small to enable detailed investigation into their attitudes to learning.

It was expected that data on student qualifications on entry to a higher education course would be useful for locating and contacting participants. However, it became apparent that the highest qualification on entry may not reflect certain qualifications. As shown in the timeline, the decision was made in March 2012 to locate additional participants using links with organisations such as the West London Lifelong Learning Network (WLLLN) and the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE).

Ethical approval of this study was provided by the University ethics committee and all necessary procedures were followed to ensure that participants were fully briefed about the purpose and intention of the study and that they were aware of their right to withdraw at any time.

Each participant was interviewed in-depth for between one to two hours. Due to time and travelling constraints, two of the interviews were carried out over the telephone. One of these interviews was not audio-recorded but a summary was produced and subsequently checked and agreed by the participant. All of the transcripts were returned to each participant for comments and/or amendments.

The interviews were fully transcribed and coded using a thematic framework based on Archer's modes of reflexivity and learning preferences. The modes of reflexivity were: autonomous reflexives who base their actions principally on their own internal conversations; communicative reflexives who share their inner dialogues with others before deciding on a course of action; meta-reflexives who are concerned with effective action within society; and fractured reflexives whose deliberations can cause anxiety preventing purposeful courses of action. Additional codes referred to learning preferences such as independent learning, collaborative learning and learning transfer. This was completed using NVivo and it was then possible to review across the data to identify patterns and anomalies. Following this, a second phase of analysis returned to the individual transcripts to construct case studies around each progression. These could then be used to illustrate particular instances and mediating factors.

Timetable

2011

July-Aug	Made contact with HEIs and began negotiating access for interviewing students Developed and piloted interview schedule
Sept	Completed 2 interviews Arranged transcription
Oct-Nov	Completed 4 interviews
Dec	Started to receive transcripts of interviews

	<p>Uploaded interview transcripts into NVivo</p> <p>Began initial analysis</p> <p>Gave paper on emerging themes from analysis of 6 interviews at SRHE Annual Researchers Conference</p>
2012	
Jan - Feb	Completed 3 interviews (1 via telephone)
March	Decision to broaden search area
March-April	Completed 10 interviews (1 via telephone)
May-July	Began phase 1 analysis
Aug – Sept	Began phase 2 analysis
Oct	Submitted one abstract to the SRHE Newer Researchers Conference and one to the SRHE Annual Research Conference
Dec	Presented papers at the SRHE Newer and Annual Research Conferences

4 Analysis of results

An overview of the results is presented according to the extent to which reflexive traits mediated progression, the relationship between reflexivity and higher education and the influence of these findings on attitudes towards learning. Three case studies are drawn on to illustrate specific points.

Reflexivity mediating progression

Integral to attitudes towards learning was the decision to progress to HE. All of the cases help illustrate how progression to higher education was mediated by different reflexivity traits. For a predominantly autonomous reflexive such as Alan, the strategic planning and ability to 'master the controllable' (Archer 2007, 202) helped him negotiate his progression by approaching his employer and drawing up a contract to embark on a graduate programme. Another example was Rick, who drew on his communicative reflexivity to seek the support of others leading up his decision to progress to higher education. Both communicative and meta-reflexive modes characterised Ella's progression to higher education, through confirmation and reassurance from others as well as a social awareness about the impact on her work with children.

Communicative reflexivity seemed especially important for the decision-making process. Rick drew on several key people to elicit their opinion before taking the ultimate decision. Ella had been influenced and positively encouraged by her manager who had experience of the same course. Although Alan did not rely on others as much, he still mentioned seeking the opinion of colleagues. These examples show clearly the importance of networks for those from a widening participation background, as described by Fuller and colleagues (2011).

The networks relied upon were personal ones with advice sought from familiar and trusted figures. This is important when considering how information, advice and guidance is sought and received among HE students from apprenticeship backgrounds. For those in employment, the strength of the relationships with

employers also had a bearing on progression. Those who were part of a cohort of apprentices within a company were generally exposed to appropriate and targeted information. This suggests that supporting networks in the workplace would help former apprentices make the best-informed decisions about progressing to HE.

Reflexivity and HE

The relationship between the higher education environment and reflexivity was important. Clegg (2010) points out that HE only valorises certain forms of reflexivity and limits the ways we might think about the future. For example, learners are encouraged not to 'stay put' and to do so suggests personal failure. This message is also central to the widening participation discourse targeted at groups such as former apprentices in higher education (Burke 2012). As Clegg (2010, 354) summarised, 'in higher education we are being incited to produce these neo-liberal subjects through particular pedagogical practices'. Alan as a predominantly autonomous reflexive most closely resembled this type of subject, demonstrating strategic planning and clear goals discussed using phrases such as, 'I made sure I knew what I wanted to do'.

However, as Burke (2012, 31) emphasises, the institutional identities of universities within a differentiated system are 'strongly tied up with student identities and this profoundly shapes individual aspirations and choices in relation to HE participation'. Compared to Alan and Ella, Rick provided detailed accounts of his feelings of difference when he applied to the pre-1992 university. Yet Rick seemed able to adapt his reflexive approach in order to 'fit in' and overcome the feeling of 'otherness' at university (Burke 2012). He adopted a more autonomous reflexivity once he arrived at university, corresponding to independent learning skills. Flam (2010) draws attention to how relations of domination generate emotions that 'silence the voice' of dominated groups. These emotions can be shame, frustration, (suppressed) anger. This is important if as it states, 'the educational system claims its toll, strengthening and cultivating the voice of its best students while silencing the others' (Flam 2010, 191). This has important implications for those who might not have the capabilities of drawing on different modes of reflexivity to adapt to certain higher education environments, for example on negative attitudes towards learning and retention rates.

Attitudes to learning

Attitudes to learning reflected reflexivity traits. For example, there appeared to be strong links between the collaborative learning environment and Ella's communicative reflexivity. An example of this is when she used 'us' and 'we' to describe how the challenges they faced as a class. There were also indications in this study that higher education learning directly contributed to a change in behaviour. For example Ella illustrated a number of examples of the different strategies she could deploy to impress the Ofsted inspector and talk to parents. As she put it, she could, 'spill out my assignments'.

In keeping with their tendency to be autonomously reflexive, both Rick and Alan rejected collaborative learning in higher education. Alan was particularly clear about wanting to focus on his personal needs and requirements. Indeed, he had rejected learning at school because he did not find it enjoyable: 'I just enjoyed learning new things, I enjoyed learning things that I was interested in, that was why I didn't excel at

school.' Another reason for rejecting collaborative learning was because they felt that their younger peers were not as focused as them and as Rick described, '...treating it like school, you know, they come into lectures late or start talking and all that stuff, or start shouting stuff in the lectures, and just on the feedback forms, I just end up writing 'get the idiots out'...' This is another example of how the HE environment was a powerful mediator of attitudes to learning.

Modes of reflexivity and attitudes to learning were evolving and to some extent these findings provide one part of larger journey of 'transition as becoming' (Gale and Parker 2012). For example, as Archer (2007) explains, autonomous reflexives can have false starts as they build their personal powers and explore the structural constraints and enablements. Also, transition itself can trigger reflexivity and Alan had started to form opinions about how his long term goals might differ to those of his employer. As he explained, he was grappling with the work-life balance and described the direction his inner dialogue was taking him:

I mean the famous motto work to live or live to work, I've changed it slightly now, decided to go for the other one! Ultimately I could end up there, but it would be on my own terms, and I don't know if the company would accept that.

There were also indications that the different HE courses could encourage various levels of reflection. An example of this was the Foundation degree in working with children and young people that Ella was studying. This was also an example of a positive attitude towards learning being utilised directly in the workplace. Indeed, both Ella and Rick had grown in confidence so much so that they were both considering further higher education progression. More work is needed into the role that developing skills of reflection can have upon attitudes towards learning more generally.

5 Project conclusions/outcomes

The main outcomes can be summarised as follows:

- Reflexive characteristics were central to whether or not they progressed to higher education and to attitudes towards learning;
- Communicative reflexivity was particularly pertinent to the decision-making process to progress and the networks relied upon were personal ones with familiar and trusted figures. This has implications for the way that information, advice and guidance are organised for former apprentices.
- Higher education environments and courses could valorise certain reflexive traits, which in turn influenced attitudes towards learning.
- The impact of the employer relationship also impacted upon attitudes towards learning, in terms of the apprenticeship learning experience, the information received and the extent to which they could apply their learning in the workplace. It is argued that attitudes towards learning could be enhanced if employees were given greater opportunity to be reflexive.
- Modes of reflexivity and attitudes to learning were evolving and to some extent these findings provide one part of larger journey of 'transition as becoming' (Gale and Parker 2012).

6 Summary of next steps planned

- To continue to analyse the data and to write up the results for publication and dissemination.
- To explore more fully certain avenues of theoretical thinking. For example, the roles of social and systemic reflexivity.
- To draw on this work to support future bids to continue to explore this area of research.

6.1 Presentation of work

- Research seminar at the University of Reading 31st January 2013
- Abstract accepted for the 'Researching Work and Learning: The visible and invisible in work and learning' Conference 2013 which is taking place 19th – 21st June 2013 (University of Stirling).
- Abstract to be submitted to the Journal of Vocational Education and Training Conference in July 2013 (Worcester College Oxford)
- Abstract to be submitted for the European Educational Research Association Conference 2013 taking place 10th – 13th September 2013 (Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul).

6.2 Publication of work

The plan for publication is to produce at least three papers based on this project:

- 1) The response among participants about the information, advice and guidance received concerning higher education. To be submitted to the Journal of Vocational Education.
- 2) The decision-making processes of former apprentices who progress to higher education. To be submitted to Studies in HE.
- 3) Attitudes towards learning of former apprentices who progress to higher education. To be submitted to the British Educational Research Journal.

6.3 Any plans to continue with the work or proposals for further research which might compliment this project.

It is hoped that further funding can be obtained to continue tracking a sub-sample of the participants involved in this project, particularly in relation to attitudes to learning on completion of their HE course.

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