

# Graduate apprenticeships are great opportunities for individuals, but are they inclusive?

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## Abstract

Higher education-level apprenticeships can provide routes to university degrees for people without the financial resources for traditional degrees. In Scotland, the first cohorts of graduate apprentices began their studies in 2017, including cohorts studying three computing programmes at our university. Our apprentices are full-time, salaried employees, studying university degrees through work-based learning and traditional modules, on campus one day each week. Narrative interviews were conducted with apprentices in their second and third trimesters, to gather context-rich information about the apprentices' backgrounds and their experiences of these new degrees. Apprentices had many reasons for taking this route and diverse pathways into it, from individual plans to their employers offering this opportunity. They had found resources to support their studies: both from their employment and from the bonds they established as a cohort. This paper presents the perspectives of apprentices, focusing on their routes to university and strategies for academic success.

## 1. Introduction

Degree apprenticeships, including Scotland's Graduate Apprenticeships, are promoted as win-win opportunities: organisations gain employees with the right skills (Bravenboer, 2016) and apprentices gain degrees, with paid employment throughout and no student debt (Rowe, Perrin, & Wall, 2016). Skills Development Scotland (SDS), who promote and award Graduate Apprenticeships in Scotland, specify the new degrees as widening access opportunities, encouraging universities to include appropriate provisions in their bids (SDS, 2016).

To explore whether the promise of inclusion has been realised, this study interviewed graduate apprentices in the first cohort studying computing degrees at a Scottish university. Scotland's Commission on Widening Access (COWA) recognises that widening access is a subtle and complex problem, rooted in families, communities, and the systematic unfairness within educational institutions' processes (2016). Widening access learners are currently identified by their postcode. However, for many students, especially mature students, this does little to describe their background (Universities Scotland, 2016). Further, this study mode may be uniquely challenging for the apprentices, situated in the "two realities" of their company and the university (CWIHE, 2016). In this study, fifteen apprentices (half the cohort) were interviewed to explore backgrounds, motivations, and study strategies within the degree's first trimesters.

## 2. Study

The interview protocol, inspired by narrative interviews (Dziallas & Fincher 2016; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) and the longitudinal interviews of the Paired Peers project (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013), led participants through their background (family, education, work) and their situated experience of beginning the graduate apprenticeship course. Fifteen apprentices were interviewed over the second and third trimesters of their courses, in their workplaces or at university. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, then analysed according to life story themes, such as participants' previous experience of higher education and their families' relevant experience.

Themes were also identified through literature reviews and previous studies of transitions into higher education, widening participation, and work-based learning. The vertical stacked column chart in Figure 1 summarises salient characteristics from the interviewees' narratives. Only one apprentice entered the programme straight from school; ten were between 20 and 30 years old and four over 30. All of the interviewees were white; three were born outside the UK. Four interviewees were female. Six apprentices were the first generation in their family to attend university. Of note, nearly half the interviewees had previous experience of university: three were graduates (including one first-in-family) and four had started degrees but dropped out. For these, the graduate apprenticeship provided an unanticipated pathway back to university – *another* chance, rather than a single life-chance. Two interviewees joined their company to do this apprenticeship. Most of the others were upskilling, already employed by their company (one for over twenty years). Seven had completed relevant Modern Apprenticeships.

Frequency	Age	Gender	Ethnicity/ nationality	Parents' HE	Siblings' HE	Previous uni	Previous apprenticeships	With current employer on starting GA
15	Over 30	Female	White, born outside UK	Both parents uni	Not yet	Started UG degree but left	YTS	Over 3 years
14								
13								
12								
11	20–30	Male	White, born in UK	One parent uni	All siblings uni	Completed UG degree	Modern Apprenticeship(s)	18 months to 3 years
10								
9								
8								
7								
6				Neither parent attended uni	No siblings attended uni	No previous uni	No previous apprenticeship(s)	Up to 18 months
5								
4								
3								
2								
1	Under 20						Joined since starting GA	

Figure 1: Summary of participants' characteristics

Few of the apprentices garner a widening participation flag, however, most interviewees identified the apprenticeship as an unanticipated opportunity to study a university degree without fees or debt, while keeping or gaining paid employment: “the going back to uni idea would have been a complete no-no if the fees weren’t being paid” [Apprentice1]. Several interviewees described this opportunity as a “no-brainer”: “Rather than getting student loans and putting yourself in debt, you can work and earn and get a degree at the same time. I thought it was a no-brainer and I jumped at the opportunity” [Apprentice13].

For many, the apprenticeship was an opportunity that came at the right time. A few had limited interest in studying when they left school, but had developed their confidence and motivation through starting careers in IT: “being a teenager and being at school [I] probably wanted to earn money and go and enjoy myself, rather than having to put another four years of hard work into books” [Apprentice6]; “I think I’ve reached a point where I can do some extra learning, like doing this degree, but enjoying it at the same time, because I enjoy my work” [Apprentice4]. Those who had tried university before felt they had gained in maturity and direction since then. Several interviewees described the difficulties of making career choices at school, including presumptions that they would or would not go to university; also mentioning that they had been unaware they would find rewarding roles in IT.

Many interviewees described good support for their studies from university staff, their employers, their families, and each other: “Everybody’s been really supportive” [Apprentice5]. Those with more responsibility at work struggled to find time for coursework and revision, whereas those who were earlier in their IT career found time for their

university studies while they were at work. Those who were new to programming found that especially challenging, but were helped by their work colleagues: “I didn’t sleep for three or four weeks with Java...I was coming in and saying to [the development team] ‘Trying to do this’ and they’re saying ‘Well, you need to try to do this’” [Apprentice4]. Given their unique context, and thrown together for one intense campus day per week, the apprentices bonded, establishing friendships and sharing skills: “Having that group that I can go to – so I can be sat [at work] and speak to the guys from uni if I’m stuck with anything” [Apprentice3].

No stigma associated with apprenticeship status was observed. However, the term was confusing for those who had completed Modern Apprenticeships and seemed inappropriate for those who already had extensive experience and responsibility.

### **3. Conclusions and implications**

The interviewees experienced the graduate apprenticeship as a great opportunity, whether they were at the beginning of their career or further on. For most, going to university or going back to university, would not have seemed realistic without their fees being paid and a wage. Interviewing this first cohort has revealed the wide range of people who feel currently excluded from university, beyond those identified by their postcode. However the challenge for universities and employers is to recruit, support, and retain truly diverse cohorts of apprentices as the programmes are scaled-up.

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