

An investigation into the progression experiences of advanced apprentices to higher level learning (0156)

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The rationale for supporting the progression of apprentices is underpinned by several national agendas, including skills, employability and social mobility. In 2006, the Leitch report stated that although higher level skills are the key to greater social mobility and achieving higher productivity, the UK's skills base lags behind that of other advanced countries (Leitch Review, 2006). In response to this, the Government committed itself to ensuring that in England by 2020, more than 90% of adults will have gained at least a level 2 qualification (equivalent to 5 GCSEs at A*-C grade) and more than 40% of all adults will have a higher education qualification (at level 4 and above) (DIUS, 2007). One approach to help achieve this is the development of the apprenticeship route so that more advanced apprentices progress to level 4 and beyond (Skills Commission, 2009).

Despite the significant expansion of apprenticeships during the last decade, only low numbers appear to progress from non-academic routes to higher education (HE) (Skills Commission, 2009). Research undertaken in the South West showed that although 38% of advanced apprentices expected to take higher level training after 6 months and 45% after 3 years, these figures were not supported by statistics of actual progression (Watton, Wild and Hicks, 2009). For example, national statistics indicate that only 2-4% of advanced apprentices progress to higher education (Seddon, 2005) and the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) data showed that in 2002-03 the figure for the South West was 7% (HEFCE, 2009). This confirmed that more advanced apprentices aspired to take higher level courses than were actually doing so. The exact reasons for this trend are not clear and there remains a dearth of data available on apprenticeship progression (HEFCE, 2009). A number of projects have concentrated upon improving the aspirations of such learners, like those carried out by lifelong learning networks (Carter, 2009) and a series of guides have been produced for those involved in progression for advanced apprentices (Anderson and Hemsworth, 2005). Some research has begun to focus upon progression from the learner's point of view. For example, UVAC on behalf of Foundation Degree Forward (FDF) examined a range of progression models in four sectors (FDF, 2008). Few studies have investigated individual experiences, despite growing political interest in stimulating progression (Skills Commission, 2009).

This paper presents findings of a larger study that sought to explore the influencing factors among advanced apprentices who continue into higher level learning. It focuses upon seven in depth interviews with advanced apprentices who have or are currently undertaking a higher level qualification in the South West of England. The small sample enabled a detailed examination of the learning journeys of three men and four women, at different ages and with diverse disciplinary backgrounds. This research was informed by a critical realist approach (Bhaskar, 1978). Realists seek to show causal explanations in a social world where structures and processes are constantly changing, making definite prediction impossible. Critical realists believe that there will always be many possible explanations for investigation and that the primary aim of social science is to be critical of the actions that lie behind false explanations (Archer et al., 1998; Scott, 2005).

The process of analysis was carried out in a similar way to that described by Layder (1998) and reflects the belief that we can never enter research with a mind clear of theoretical ideas and assumptions. After

an initial reading of the transcript as soon as possible after the interviews, 'provisional' code labels were used to identify segments of transcript and themes. Reflecting the theoretical approach, the results were analysed with specific reference to the context and mechanisms that enabled these advanced apprentices to continue to higher education. For example, a culture of staff development in one company (context) made it financially possible (mechanism) for an advanced apprentice to pursue a higher education pathway.

The preliminary findings show the learners to be a diverse group of individuals working in different areas of employment, each possessing a unique skills profile. Yet, they appear to demonstrate some common traits, the most obvious being a strong determination to succeed. They identify themselves as vocational rather than academic learners, with a strong desire to apply learning directly in practice. For all of the participants, motivation was enhanced when their learning was acknowledged in the workplace (e.g. promotion). Another important mechanism that appeared to influence progression was the support offered by training providers and employers, both in terms of personal guidance and financial investment. All participants commented on the learning transition experienced when they moved to higher level learning. Further analysis will continue to examine how this relates to theories of learning and identity (Fuller and Unwin, 2003).

The implications of this research are extensive. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to explore in detail the experiences of advanced apprentices who have already continued to higher level learning. Indeed, this is something that has been recommended by the Skills Commission (2009) and is central to understanding the aspirations and motivations of this group of learners. Appropriate provision, whether support for, or access to, higher learning, needs to be informed by accurate data. The findings can then be used to inform future policies and practices designed to meet their needs. It is also likely that new concepts and theoretical ideas may emerge relating to learner identity and transition that can inform future research.

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