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### **Crossing boundaries: investigating the transition from apprenticeship to higher education (0186)**

In the strategy document *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009), the government emphasised the importance of encouraging more opportunities for transition from apprenticeship to higher education. This is primarily based on the ambition announced by Leitch (2006), that in England 40% of all adults to need to be qualified at level 4 and above by 2020. 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).

There has been a significant expansion of apprenticeships during the last decade, with the number of completing apprenticeships increasing from 37,460 in 2002-03 to 90,130 in 2005-06 (HEFCE, 2009). However, national statistics indicate that only 2-4% of advanced apprentices progressed to higher education (Seddon, 2005). Indeed, the South East of England had the lowest regional progression rate of 4% reported in 2002-3 (HEFCE, 2009). The exact reasons for this trend are not clear but there remains a dearth of data available. 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 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 work builds on an earlier smaller study that explored the factors influencing advanced apprentices who continued into higher education in the South West of England (Dismore, 2010). A key theme identified was the extent to which expectations of higher education were met.

This larger study involves individual interviews with twenty advanced apprentices in the London area and specifically addresses the transition by exploring the relationship between the decisions to pursue higher education and the perceived impact. Analysis draws upon the work of Bourdieu (1986) and particularly the concepts of field, cultural, economic and symbolic capital. This has been helpful in identifying the relative qualities and values attributed to learning and the way in which these are utilised. Like Crozier and colleagues (2008) stated, they are also useful for exploring how learners negotiate and 'play' the fields of the workplace as well as education. As Bourdieu explained, capital is relative to the field within which it is used (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and some forms of capital can hinder rather than aid progress.

Preliminary findings show that many of the learners compare themselves with other peers, not just in terms of their qualifications, but also in terms of their careers and lifestyle. They do this by drawing on perceptions of their own capital, comparing their salary and their position in the workplace, both of which were frequently attributed to the qualifications they had gained. Understandably, this is most evident among the part-time learners already in employment experiencing promotions and salary rises in response to their educational achievements. In this sense, the learners appear to actively 'play the game' at work to reap economic capital. However, developing an awareness of investing in capital is just as important for those in full-time education. Yet at times it is clear that comparison can be hampered by confusion around the value of certain qualifications. For example, some appear unsure about how to equate the foundation degree with other qualifications. This implies that work is still needed to bring clarity to progression routes and the higher education framework.

This research is an important contribution to building the broader evidence base needed to accurately plan for and develop progression routes to higher education from vocational pathways. Appropriate provision needs to be informed by accurate data. In addition to this, the data is being used to develop theoretical ideas relating to forms of capital and habitus as well as learner identity and transition.

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