Attitudes towards learning of former apprentices who progress to higher education: a
critical realist approach

Apprenticeship progression has received increasing attention during the last decade. This is partly due to the ambition set out in the Leitch report (2006), that in England 40% of all adults need to be qualified at level 4 and above by 2020 and also emphasis by the government on encouraging more opportunities for transition from apprenticeship to higher education (BIS, 2009). Despite this, only low numbers appear to progress from non-academic routes to higher education (HE) (HEFCE, 2009). For example, Smith and Joslin (2011) reported that 5.3% of apprentices in 2005/06 progressed to higher education immediately, although this figure rose to 13.1% after three years.

In addition to the tracking study conducted by Smith and Joslin (2011), a small number of projects have concentrated upon improving the aspirations of such learners, like those carried out by Lifelong Learning Networks (LNNs) (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, Thomas and colleagues (2012) reported on the impact of Aimhigher and LLNs on aspiration rising. However, no study has specifically investigated learning following progression, despite calls for research into the attitudes of apprentices following progression (Skills Commission, 2009).

As Hodkinson and Macleod (2010) have pointed out, researching learning can be problematic:

> 'Learning does not have a clear physical or reified identity in the world. Rather, learning is a concept constructed and developed by people to label and thus start to explain some complex processes that are important in our lives.' (p.174)

Kahn and colleagues (2012) also acknowledged the complexities of learning when they reported that in the past, theories of learning have tended to prioritise socio-cultural or psychological considerations. Instead, they argue, we need to develop ways of considering both personal and socio-cultural factors. One way to address this is to take a critical realist approach (Bhaskar, 1978). 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). Crucially, it also takes as its starting point that social reality is stratified, incorporating both structural and agential strata.

This paper presents findings of a study that explored the attitudes to learning of nineteen apprentices who had progressed to higher education in the south of England. Reflecting the critical realist approach, the results were analysed with reference to modes of reflexivity as described by Archer (2007) as well as specific learning styles. Four codes represented modes of reflexivity: 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 styles such as independent learning, collaborative learning and learning transfer. It was then possible to review across the data to identify patterns and anomalies.

Preliminary findings show that attitudes to learning are mediated by both personal powers and socio-cultural factors. For example, many of the participants were autonomous reflexives demonstrating preferences for independent learning, identifying themselves as vocational learners with a strong desire to apply learning directly in practice. For some of these participants, the social aspects of the workplace and learning environment were integral to their learning experience and decision-making. However, as Dyke and colleagues (2012) found, participants presented different modes of reflexivity depending on the context. Likewise, attitudes to learning could change depending on the features of participation experienced during their apprenticeship (Fuller and Unwin, 2003), experiences of higher education and the transition itself.

The implications of this research are extensive. Very little research has involved analysis of the relations between structure and agency to inform learning (Kahn et al. 2012) and no studies, to the author's knowledge, have investigated learning following progression from apprenticeship to higher education. From this paper emerges a complex picture relating to learner identity and transition that can inform future research.

References

Anderson, A. and Hemsworth, D. (2005). *From Apprenticeship to Higher Education*. UVAC.

Archer, M. (2007) *Making Our Way Through the World: human reflexivity and social mobility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M., Bhaskar, R., Collier, A., Lawson, T. and Norrie, A. (Eds.) (1998). *Critical Realism: essential reading*. London: Routledge.

Bhaskar, R. (1978). *A Realist Theory of Science*. Hassocks: Harvesters Press.

Carter, P. (2009). *Progression from Vocational and Applied Learning to Higher Education in England*. UVAC.

Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2009) *Higher Ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy*. London: BIS.

Dyke, M., Johnston, B. and Fuller, A. (2012) Approaches to reflexivity: navigating educational and career pathways. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1-18. iFirst article.

Higher Education Funding Council for England. (HEFCE) (2009) *Pathways to Higher Education Apprenticeships* 2009/17. Available online http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_17/. Accessed 22.06.2010.

Fuller, A. and Unwin, L. (2003). Learning as apprentices in the contemporary UK workplace: creating and managing expansive and restrictive participation. *Journal of Education and Work, 16* (4), 407-426.

Hodkinson, P. and Macleod, F. (2010) Contrasting concepts of learning and contrasting research methodologies: affinities and bias. *British Educational Research Journal* 36(2): 173-189.

Kahn, P. Qualter, A. and Young, R. (2012) Structure and agency in learning: a critical realist theory of the development of capacity to reflect on academic practice. *Higher Education Research and Development* 1-13, iFirst article.

Leitch Review. (2006). *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills* (final report) London: HM Treasury.

Scott, D. (2005). Critical realism and empirical research methods in education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39(4), 633-646.

Skills Commission. (2009). *Progression through Apprenticeships*. London: Policy Connect.

Smith, S. and Joslin, H. (2011) *Apprentice Progression Tracking Research Project Report. Longitudinal tracking of advanced level apprentice cohorts progressing into higher education 2005-06 to 2009-10.* Centre for Work-Based Learning: University of Greenwich.

Thomas, E., Cox, J., and Gallagher, P. (2012) Progression to higher education: the voice of the apprentice. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 17 (1): 93-113.