

**An ESRC HIVE-PED Research Report: How age, gender, class and industry frame complex, pragmatic, delayed progression patterns to higher education for apprentices in England**

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**Abstract**

Apprentices are a growing, increasingly important constituency of part-time learners in England. The numbers of those achieving level three advanced apprenticeships increased from 45,500 in 2008-09 to 95,000 in 2012-13. Given the recent dramatic fall in part-time recruitment to higher education, it is important to improve understanding of the apprenticeships constituency, which represents both a new focus for widening participation and an emerging work-based market. Recent research by an ESRC/ government-funded Higher Vocational Education and Pedagogy (HIVE-PED) specialist team has shown that the progression rate of apprentices into higher education in England increased to 18.8% for a cohort of students tracked for seven years from 2005-06. Based on ground-breaking new evidence, this paper provides information about complex different progression patterns and the interplay between demographic and sectoral factors which determine the pragmatic, delayed journeys apprentices make and the differential extent to which apprenticeships provide a vehicle for social mobility.

**Introduction**

Unequal patterns of learner progression into higher education in England, or indeed, more plaintively, the recurring motifs of a lack of progression, are nothing new. In effect, although decades of widening participation initiatives have increased broader 'mass' engagement in higher education to a large extent (McNay, 2005), many argue that access to the very best, most advantageous rewards within the English system of higher education, especially access to highly selective elite universities, postgraduate provision and upper tier employment, still remains strongly skewed in favour of young, full-time, white, male, upper middle-class, independent school or selective grammar school 'A'-level educated students (Archer et al., 2003; Pfeffer, 2008). The persistent reproduction of class, race and, at higher professional levels, gender and industry-related inequalities within education has tended still to underpin a stratified, privileged system of academic and related occupational success in England that seems to have remained relatively unchanged in important ways during the past century (Breen, 2005). As reported in July, 2014, David Sweeney recently argued that "[d]espite the many achievements of British universities, ... the UK [has] "comprehensively failed to get away from the social elite in higher education' " (Reisz, 2014) while, as Fuller and Unwin point out, "A-Levels remain the 'royal route' to University, bachelor degrees - and increasingly to Higher Apprenticeships" (Fuller and Unwin, 2012).

Yet, despite persistent inequalities, greater knowledge and understanding of patterns of progression into higher education do enable both awareness and potential action to be taken to continue to widen participation and improve equity. One area of relative obscurity within the English education system remains that of apprenticeships provision. As yet, full knowledge of English national patterns of learner progression from apprenticeships into higher education has been limited by the bureaucratic intricacies and tracking difficulties within the system itself (Joslin and Smith, 2014). The historically Byzantine

complexity of the further, higher and apprenticeships vocational education system in England (NAO, 2011) has obfuscated understanding of the national picture on qualifications, learner data and progression. Progression of learners between the sectors of further, apprenticeships and higher education is complicated by different funding routes, variable data collection systems and a highly dense mixture of huge numbers of vocational qualifications delivered across multiple different systems in a variety of publicly and privately funded organizations (Jameson, Joslin and Smith, 2014).

To enable fuller understanding of the obscure environment of further, higher and apprenticeships provision is to aim to enable local systems to work more coherently. This paper reports on newly identified patterns of progression data. These can be utilised to provide benefit for learners and providers, reducing the potential for a long-term future 'chaotic landscape' in FE-HE (Sherlock and Perry, 2013) and increasing opportunities for social mobility, organisational sense-making (Weick, 2012), learner empowerment and equity through expedited progression to higher study.

### **Methodology: National Patterns of Learner Progression from Apprenticeships in England**

To tackle the apparently impossible task of linking actual learner data on live people from further education Individual Learner Record (ILR) and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) higher education records, a research team at the University of Greenwich has recently employed a novel methodology to pioneer research into the progression of different types of learners from apprenticeships provision into higher education. In collaboration with HESA, the team developed a ground-breaking methodology to match detailed ILR datasets with HESA datasets to identify and analyse the data on apprentices and college students progressing to HE in FE and to university (Joslin and Smith, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). In collaboration with other UK experts in higher vocational education (Evans et al., 2011; Fuller and Unwin, 2010; Parry and Thompson, 2002; Parry et al., 2012; UVAC, 2010), this research is now being further developed as part of an international ESRC-funded and Department for Innovation and Skills (BIS)-funded seminar series on Higher Vocational Education and Pedagogy (HIVE-PED).

### **Different Routes to HE: New Data on Delayed Learner Progression from Apprenticeships**

Prior research on the progression of apprentices to higher education in England quoted a progression rate of 6% (UKCES, 2010), based on a HEFCE report in the series "Pathways to Higher Education" on apprentices (HEFCE, 2009). However, this paper reports on data from a recently completed BIS research report (Joslin and Smith, 2014) which finds that, when tracked longitudinally into higher education over seven years, the progression rate is 18.8%. Findings from this new research (Joslin and Smith, 2013a; Jameson, Joslin and Smith, 2014; Joslin and Smith, 2014) into the progression pathways of apprentices reveals alternative, pragmatic, delayed journeys to higher education, influenced in particular by class, gender and industry. The new progression research reported here is based on a methodology of matching level 3 FE learner or advanced level apprentice cohorts from ILR datasets with level 4 learner non-prescribed higher education or higher apprenticeship ILR datasets and with HESA data covering all prescribed higher education. Each cohort is matched for each year of entry, so that for the latest apprentice study, the following data is obtained, as in *Figure 1* below (Joslin and Smith, 2014, p. 22):

Advanced Level Apprentice Start Year	Population	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	3 years tracking		All tracked to date		
		Number	Number	Number	Number	Number	Number	Number	higher education Immediate Progression	% higher education Progression	Total Number to higher education	% higher education progression	Number of years tracked
005/06	33285	505	1510	1885	830	650	520	360	3900	11.7	6255	18.8	7
006/07	35525		475	1525	1995	965	685	445	3995	11.2	6090	17.1	6
007/08	41370			465	1625	2450	1000	620	4540	11.0	6160	14.9	5
008/09	49360				555	2180	2165	990	4900	9.9	5890	11.9	4
009/10	53815					755	2350	1990	5095	9.5	5095	9.5	3
010/11	26430*						465	2390	na	na	2855	10.8	2

\* It takes most advanced level apprentices at least two years to complete their framework and so this population does not include those who started in 2010 but have not completed.

**Figure 1: Advanced Level Apprenticeships Progression in England 2005/6 – 2010/11**

Figure 1 reveals that the progression journeys of apprentices are much more complex than those of standard full-time students. Many apprentices enter higher education in the same academic year as they complete their apprenticeship: this is partly explained by the fact that about 50% of advanced level apprentices have already studied at this level (BIS, 2011). Thereafter, however, significant numbers progress one or two years later, and still relatively high figures progress three, four, five and six years after that. There are many reasons for these delayed patterns of progression. They relate to the fact that these are part-time learners in work, often with good jobs, who, if seeking progression, will look for further part-time provision; these learners also might not have the entry requirements necessary for HE entry (Fuller and Unwin, 2012). Additionally, these journeys are made by people with active working lives who are perhaps gaining more responsibility at work, having children, moving home, losing jobs, changing career directions.

*For this paper, two key factors are highlighted from these research findings:*

Firstly, the research reveals a fall in the overall progression “rate” when like-for-like three year progression periods are compared. Over the five cohorts it has dropped from 11.7% for the 2005-06 cohort to 9.5% for the 2009-10 cohort. However, Figure 1 also shows that while the rate has been dropping, numbers progressing were increasing, as were numbers of advanced level apprentices by 20,530 over the five years 2005-06 to 2009-10. To explain the reason for the fall in the rate of progression, the cohort age profile reveals that much of the increase in advanced apprentice numbers was people aged 25+, while the gender profile shows that most growth comprised an increase in numbers of female apprentices over 25. Female apprentices made up 38% of the cohort in 2005-06, but

by 2009-10 comprised 51% of the cohort. Recent evaluations of apprenticeship provision from both apprentice and employer perspectives partially explain this (Ipsos MORI, 2014; 2014a). Interviews with apprentices reveal that those in more traditional apprenticeships like Engineering and Construction, as well as Social Care, Public Services and Health, are more likely to view apprenticeship as a route to a career. Employers in these sectors were also more likely to offer a further qualification including higher apprenticeships, HNCs, Foundation degrees and Honours degrees. But, as the Ipsos MORI report says:

“The recent expansion in Apprenticeship numbers has been in newer, less traditional frameworks dominated by three framework groups in particular: Business, Administration and Law (157% growth in starts between 2008/09 and 2011/12); Health and Public Services (214% growth in starts); and Retail and Commercial Enterprise (125% growth in starts). These framework groups are also associated with the least amount, and shortest duration, of training” (Ipsos MORI, 2014, p. 7)

These are also frameworks where females aged 25+ dominate and, as they are less “career oriented”, there is much less expectation among employers and apprentices about progression to higher education. The “expansive – restrictive” apprenticeship continuum sheds light on these different sorts of advanced apprenticeship, while other limiting factors in addition to qualification pervade the culture of some apprenticeship frameworks (Fuller and Unwin, 2011).

A second key factor relates to the demographic make-up of these “non-traditional” HE students, and their different social backgrounds from those of “traditional” higher education entrants. Because anonymised individual learner data is available when matching databases, the team could relate postcodes to various indices of deprivation. HEFCE’s POLAR classifications were used, showing areas with differing take-up of higher education. POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 represent domiciles with the lowest take-up of higher education. This is generally regarded as a good proxy for deprivation (HEFCE, 2012). Significantly, in the 2005 -06 cohort, 46% of apprentices who progress to HE come from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2, compared to 23% of all HE entrants. This suggests that apprenticeships provide a platform for social mobility. However, a deeper look at the data shows that this is the case for certain frameworks (Engineering, Accountancy, Business Administration, Health and Social Care, Sporting Excellence, Dental Nursing and IT Services and development) but not necessarily for others (Joslin and Smith, 2014, p. 57), suggesting that progression routes are differentiated based on age, class, gender and industry.

## **Conclusion**

In view of the recent fall in part-time recruitment to higher education, improvements in understanding of apprenticeships progression routes represents both a new focus for widening participation and a developing work-based market. The presentation of this paper will discuss detailed ways in which age, class, gender, industry and regional variations play into this analysis. If apprenticeships lead to gradual social mobility, in complex, alternative, delayed pathways, influenced by demographic and industry factors, as the data suggests, more detailed analysis needs to be undertaken to understand the influences of and interrelationships between age, domicile, framework, qualification, gender, and local and regional supply of appropriate higher education pathways.

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