

# Work in Progress

A report investigating young people's experiences of apprenticeships

April 2017

## Context

The research was commissioned by YMCA, with the fieldwork conducted by specialist youth research agency, YouthSight.

The sample consisted of more than 400 in-depth interviews with young people aged between 16 and 26 years old, who had experience of apprenticeships.

The fieldwork was carried out in England and Wales between November 2016 and March 2017.

A special 'thank you' goes to all the young people who shared their experiences as part of this research, as well as the local YMCAs across England and Wales who helped to facilitate this.



YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping more than 58 million people in 119 countries.

Here in England and Wales, where it all began, 116 YMCAs work to transform more than 740 different communities, impacting on the lives of more than 630,000 people every year.

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

YMCA enables almost 68,000 people every year to engage in education and training. This includes almost 3,700 people trained through YMCA apprenticeships each year.

# Executive summary

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The Government is working to oversee a rapid expansion of the apprenticeship system in an attempt to help young people gain the necessary skills to enter into the workplace and progress in their chosen career.

However, despite the political capital afforded to them, in many cases, apprenticeships continue to be seen as a 'second class' option for young people, and for others, not an option at all, echoing wider public perceptions.

To help address the shortcomings with the current apprenticeship offer and tackle these barriers, *Work in Progress* is rooted in the experiences of young apprentices.

## Apprenticeships are proving to be a positive experience for the majority of young people

- ▶ Four fifths of young people (79%) reported being satisfied with their experience of apprenticeships.
- ▶ More than three quarters of young people said that going on an apprenticeship helped improve their skills and knowledge (91%), their ability to do their job (78%), as well as their overall career prospects (82%).
- ▶ Almost four in five young people (79%) reported that they were offered a job at the end of their apprenticeship.

However, speaking to young people also reveals a number of significant barriers and shortcomings within the existing apprenticeship system. These are hindering young people's chances of success, and in some cases, even preventing others from starting an apprenticeship.

## Apprenticeships are still not being presented as a valid route to many young people

In many cases, those who wanted to undertake an apprenticeship reported a feeling of being 'pushed aside' at school, as focus was put on those individuals who wanted to apply to university. Others were actively discouraged from undertaking an apprenticeship by those around them.

- ▶ Fewer than one in four young people reported receiving support and advice on their apprenticeship from a teacher or lecturer (22%), or from a careers advisor (17%).
- ▶ More than three in five young people (63%) found out about their options using the internet, and more than a third (36%) from their friends and family.
- ▶ More than a third of young people (34%) felt more could be done to improve the amount of support and advice available to them prior to undertaking an apprenticeship.

### Often, work commitments are undermining young people's ability to study as part of their apprenticeship

- ▶ Almost a quarter of former apprentices (24%) said they found it difficult to balance the study and work elements of their apprenticeship.
- ▶ More than a third of young people (34%) said they would have liked to have spent more time studying while undertaking their apprenticeship, and that apprenticeships could be enhanced by improving the quality of the study element.

### Salaries are not always reflective of young apprentices' responsibilities and living costs

- ▶ Almost two-thirds of young people (63%) said the reason they undertook an apprenticeship was because it was an opportunity to get paid while learning.
- ▶ Only just over a third of young people (35%) said the salary they received enabled them to afford their basic living costs.
- ▶ Fewer than half of young people (44%) believed the salary they got as an apprentice was reasonable for the work they did and the training they received.
- ▶ More than one in five young people (22%) said that they did not feel valued by their employer while undertaking their apprenticeship.

Addressing these weaknesses requires quality to be embedded into the system. It requires a partnership between different stakeholders and it requires the needs of young people being met. Accordingly, based on the views and experiences of the young people participating in this research, YMCA is recommending:

- ▶ Providing improved access to specialist careers advice and information relating to apprenticeships
- ▶ Extending work experience opportunities to better prepare young people for apprenticeships
- ▶ Developing further campaigns to promote apprenticeships in schools and colleges
- ▶ Embedding designated and structured study time within an apprentice's working hours
- ▶ Facilitating young people to develop their functional skills alongside their apprenticeship
- ▶ Offering targeted discounts to young apprentices to help with basic living costs
- ▶ Ensuring apprentices are appropriately remunerated for the work they undertake
- ▶ Highlighting the financial benefits to young people undertaking an apprenticeship.

# Introduction

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Young people today are facing an increasingly volatile job market as they struggle to make the transition from education to sustained employment.

While the inherent disadvantages young people face with as a result of their low experience levels is by no means new, their situation today is compounded by an education and skills system that is failing to equip them with the skills that employers need.

This is coupled with an economy with a commonly recognised long-term productivity problem.<sup>1</sup>

The result is a UK youth unemployment rate of 12.3%<sup>2</sup>, equating to hundreds of thousands of young people struggling to take their first steps into employment.<sup>3</sup>

It is within this context that the Government is working to oversee a rapid expansion of the apprenticeship system in an attempt to help young people gain the necessary skills to enter the workplace and progress in their chosen career.

An apprenticeship is defined as a full-time paid job, which incorporates both on and off-the-job training. A successful apprentice will usually receive a nationally recognised qualification on completing the course; however, this requirement is removed under new standards.

Since the Coalition Government came into power in 2010, technical education, including apprenticeships, has been the subject of a number of independent reviews.

These reviews brought apprenticeships to the forefront of plans to tackle the economic problems caused by the recession and help reduce then spiralling levels of youth unemployment.

However, despite the political capital afforded to them, in many cases, apprenticeships continue to be seen as a 'second class' option for young people, and for others, not an option at all, echoing wider public perceptions.

Significant efforts have been made to better promote and encourage take-up of apprenticeships; however, elevating their status requires quality to be embedded into the system, so that young people, employers, and the wider population view them as a worthwhile investment and undertaking.

It is, therefore, important that quality is not sacrificed in pursuit of quantity.

Much has been written about the need to make the apprenticeship system work for employers and the economy. However, it is important that the views of the young people who undertake them are heard in shaping any future arrangements.

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The success of the apprenticeship system, therefore, requires young people to be seen not just as passive recipients, but as valid stakeholders. It requires their voices being listened to and their experiences utilised as the Government continues to progress its reforms.

Speaking to young people who have been on an apprenticeship reveals their benefits, and highlights the very real successes that they have achieved as a result of undertaking it.

However, it also reveals some of the difficulties they experienced along the way. These difficulties represent both the barriers to success and barriers others face when trying to undertake an apprenticeship.

To help address the shortcomings with the current apprenticeship offer and tackle these barriers, *Work in Progress* is rooted in the experiences of young apprentices. The issues outlined and the recommendations put forward are the result of extensive consultation with these young people.

They represent the areas on which Governments must focus if they are to create a system that offers everyone the opportunity to find sustained employment and the opportunity to progress throughout their career.

# Policy context

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Apprenticeships represent a key component of the Government's strategy to tackle youth unemployment and address the skills shortage currently facing the UK.

Indeed, a 'long-term productivity problem' and 'skills shortage' form the context to the latest independent enquiry into technical education in England released last year,<sup>4</sup> and similar themes are encapsulated within the Welsh apprenticeship strategy, released in February this year.<sup>5</sup>

In its most recent drive to increase participation in England, in 2015, the Government set a target of three million new apprenticeship starts by 2020.<sup>6</sup>

In comparison, the period of 2010/11 to 2014/15 saw 2,428,340 apprenticeship starts across all age groups in England. Of these, 1,410,170 were undertaken by those aged 16 to 24 years old.<sup>7</sup>

In order to achieve the increase, the Government has since announced a number of new measures. These include an obligation to report annually on the progress made to meet this target included in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

The Enterprise Act 2016 provided the Secretary of State with the power to set targets for apprenticeships in public bodies in England to contribute towards meeting the national targets.

In addition, the Enterprise Act 2016 established a number of new measures aimed to ensure quality, including the establishment of an Institute for Apprenticeships, an independent, employer-led body, which, from April 2017, will regulate the quality of apprenticeships.

The term 'apprenticeship' was also given the same legal status as degrees, with the term protected, allowing the Government to take action if it is misused.

This was closely followed by the Government transferring responsibility for apprenticeship policy from the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to the Department for Education (DfE) in a July 2016 cabinet reshuffle. This was done with a view to taking an 'end-to-end view of skills and education'.

The drive to increase apprenticeship numbers was also matched with a major new funding model in order to increase capacity within the system and encourage more employers to take on apprentices.

The Apprenticeship Levy was originally announced in the summer 2015 budget, and came into force in April 2017.



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Under the levy, UK employers with a salary bill of more than £3 million a year are expected to pay 0.5% of their salary bill over this amount to HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Employers will then be able to draw down these funds to pay for apprenticeship training.

While skills and training are devolved policy areas, the Apprenticeship Levy will apply across the UK.

The introduction of the Levy, and subsequent measures announced in England, illustrate a shift towards ‘employer-led’ apprenticeships in an attempt to create a system that better matches the needs of the workforce.

Under the new system, a small set of employers are required to submit a new ‘standard’, a short list of what the apprenticeship covers, and associated assessment plan. This will be approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships.

The requirement of a formal, nationally-recognised qualification is no longer present, but instead, an assessment plan must be in place, which involves an end point assessment, to ensure competencies are met in full.

In Wales, a commitment by the Welsh Government has been made to create 100,000 apprenticeship places over the next five years.<sup>8</sup>

In comparison, Wales saw 140,452 apprenticeship starts from all ages over the period from 2012/13 to 2014/15. Of these, 68,690 were undertaken by those aged 16 to 24 years old.<sup>9</sup>

In a drive to both improve and increase apprenticeships, the Welsh Government has also laid out a number of delivery priorities for Wales for 2016 to 2020.

Echoing many of the priorities in England, these include addressing acute skills shortages, introducing an all-age approach to focus on the transition of school leavers into high-quality employment opportunities, and developing skill pathways to integrate apprenticeships into the wider education system.

The priority given to apprenticeships in both England and Wales represents recognition that the current system is not doing enough to enable those young people not attending university to enter into work.

The purpose of this report is not to critique Governments’ policies, but instead to examine the experiences of young apprentices and advocate for change based on these.

# Apprenticeships are positive for the majority

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Apprenticeships are proving to be a positive experience for the majority of young people undertaking them, providing opportunities to gain the vital knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the workplace and progress in their chosen careers.

Indeed, four fifths of young people (79%) reported being satisfied with their experience of apprenticeships and said that, based on their own experience, they would recommend doing an apprenticeship to someone else (80%).

Given these levels of satisfaction, it is clear that in the majority of cases, apprenticeships are achieving their aims, and speaking to young people reveals the extent of these benefits.

The most notable benefit reported from young people is an increase in their confidence levels. Many reported initially feeling nervous or shy, both around others and within the workplace more generally.

Undertaking an apprenticeship afforded these individuals the opportunity to develop their skills and confidence within a supportive environment, enabling them to make the transition into full-time and sustained employment.

*“I like meeting people and building up my confidence. I can actually speak to someone now, whereas I couldn’t a year ago. That’s really valuable for me, not just now but also the future, both inside and outside of work.”*

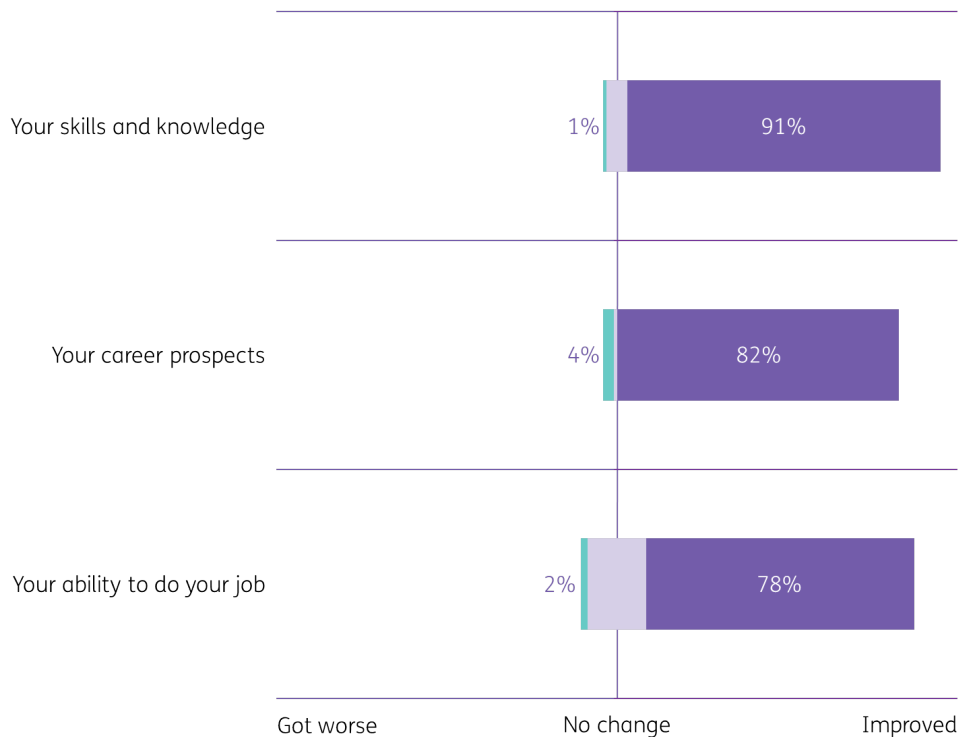
Shea, 17, Somerset

*“I believe if I had gone to university to study a degree, I wouldn’t have necessarily developed personally with my confidence and any skills to benefit me in later life.”*

Shannon, 21, Lincolnshire

The benefits of apprenticeships are also evidenced by the fact that more than three quarters of young people said that going on an apprenticeship helped improve their skills and knowledge (91%), their ability to do their job (78%), as well as their overall career prospects (82%).

What impact did undertaking the apprenticeship(s) have on the following? (n=400)



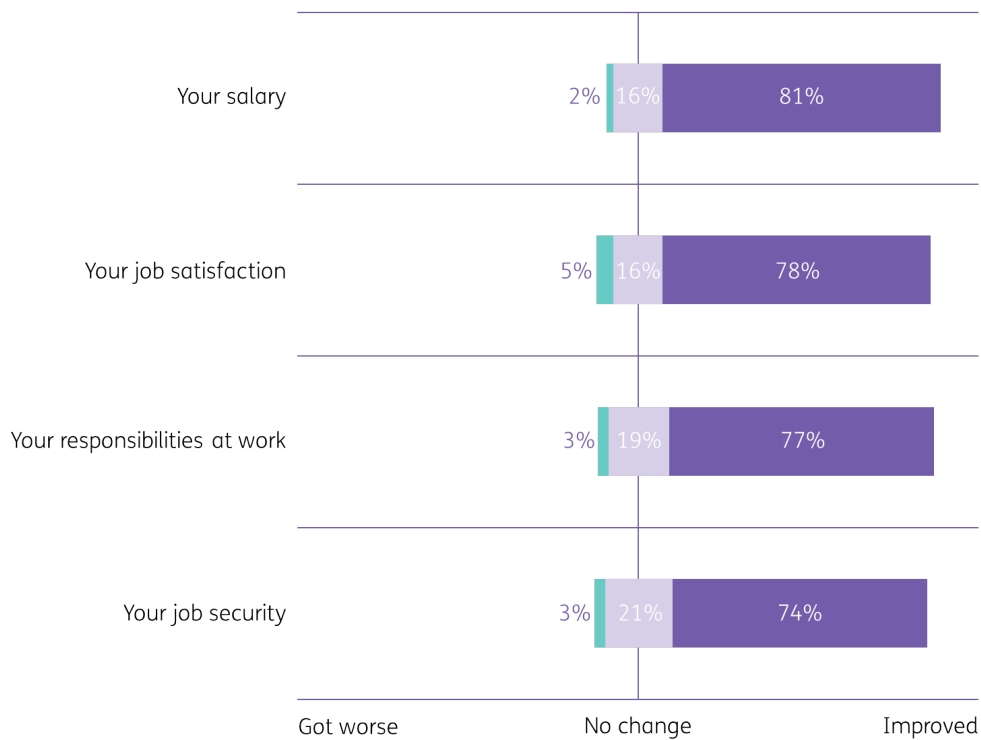
Importantly, therefore, for the majority of those participating in apprenticeships, they are seemingly helping to equip young people for future work and career progression, rather than just their current job.

Many apprentices relished the opportunity to gain practical skills in the workplace, while also undertaking studying on the side, feeling that this was more effective at readying them for employment than if they were to undertake purely academic work alone.

While there is a recognised disconnect between the skills that young people have and the skills that employers say they require, the improvements recognised by young people illustrates that apprenticeships are going some way at least to bridging the skills gap.

Given that more than three quarters of young people currently in employment said that completing an apprenticeship improved their responsibilities at work (77%), their job satisfaction (78%) and security (74%), and their salary (81%), it is also clear that apprenticeships are having a long-term benefit for the majority of those participating in them.

What impact did the completion of your apprenticeship(s) have on the following? (n=295)



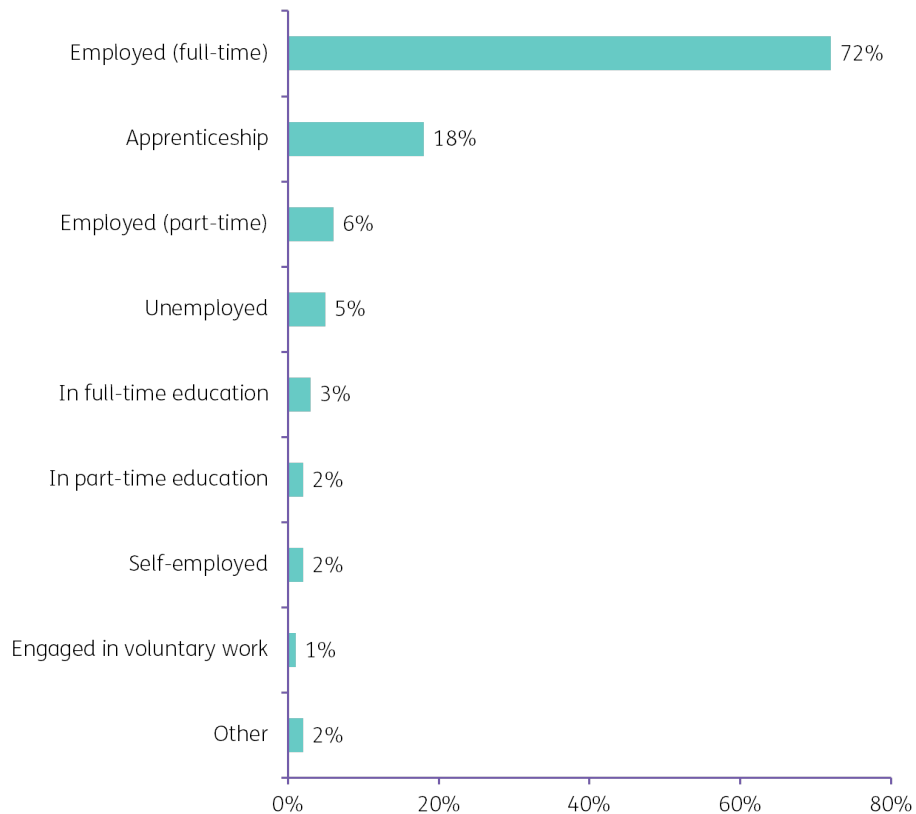
*“To be honest, it’s made me want to achieve more. Before, I kind of felt ‘oh if I get a job, it’s a job, it’ll pay the bills’... Because I am still young, it’s not made me think this is enough, I want to stop here. It’s made me want to strive harder and be even better.”*  
 Fiona, 23, Nottinghamshire

*“I think sometimes, when I was looking at other jobs, the expectation was there that you must know everything about that job before starting. I think when you start an apprenticeship, the expectation isn’t there. They know and understand that you’re training and that they’re there to teach you. So you don’t feel pressured to be perfect.”*  
 Carlie, 26, Swansea

Accordingly, apprenticeships are also providing a successful antidote to the barriers faced by this generation of young people when finding employment, as almost four in five young people (79%) reported that they were offered a job at the end of their apprenticeship.

The success of apprenticeships in helping young people progress is further illustrated by the fact that only one in 20 young people (5%) interviewed reported being unemployed after having completed an apprenticeship.

What is your current employment status? (n=400)



While it is not always possible for an employer to offer the young person a job on the completion of their apprenticeship, it is clear that the majority of young people had moved into either additional training or some form of employment.

Given the positive outcomes reported by young people, it is possible to conclude that, in the majority of cases, undertaking an apprenticeship is undoubtedly a worthwhile experience that effectively equips a young person with the skills they need to progress.

However, speaking to young people also reveals a number of significant barriers and shortcomings within the existing apprenticeship system. These are hindering young people's chances of success and, in some cases, even preventing others from starting an apprenticeship.

Given the political capital behind apprenticeships, and the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy creating increased demand across all sectors, there is a real opportunity for the Government to address these issues and create a system that works for all young people.

## Support and advice

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Despite the benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship being widely recognised by those who have completed them, they are still not being presented as a valid route to work to many young people.

As such, conversations around post-16 options for young people continue to be dominated by talk of pathways towards university, as many young people fail to receive the support and advice they need in school to pursue an apprenticeship.

This is illustrated by the fact that only 4% of young people undertook an apprenticeship because their school suggested that they did.

Critically, therefore, there currently exists a disconnect between the Government's attempts to increase apprenticeship starts, and the information and professional advice given to young people about the range of opportunities available to them.

Indeed, in many cases, those who wanted to undertake an apprenticeship reported a feeling of being 'pushed aside' at school, as teachers and professional careers advisors focused on those individuals who wanted to apply to university, to the detriment of other young people.

*"For me, when I was in school, there was no mention of apprenticeships. It was all focused on university. I noticed with my friends as well, the ones that didn't want to go to university, they were also pushed to a side and were told to look at things that they want to do when you leave school. 'We'll give you a lesson on how to write a CV' and that's it."*  
Samuel, 22, Cambridgeshire

*"You didn't really get that many options. I think it's just the pressure there, you have to go to uni to be successful."*  
Bethany, 20, London

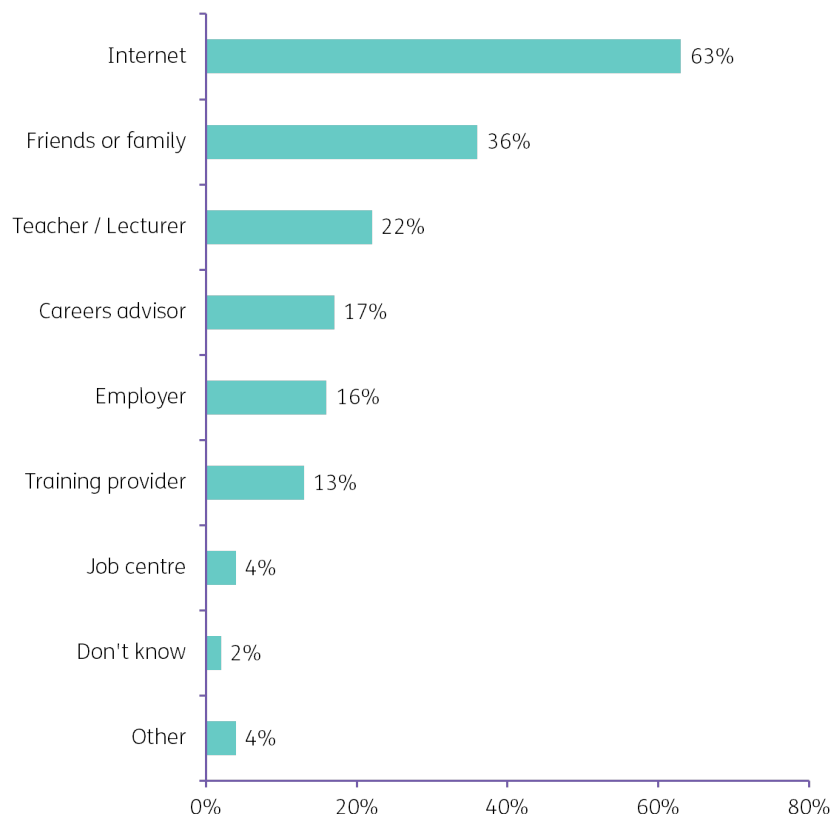
*"Well in my school, when I said that I didn't want to apply to university, they just kind of put me on a computer and said look at this apprenticeship website... You're not seen as successful in life if you don't go to university."*  
Honour, 19, Cambridgeshire

*"In school, it was like you had to go to college and you had to go to uni. So apprenticeships were seen for the people who didn't have brains to go and do. I don't think that's right, it's just a different skill."*  
Catherine, 18, Swansea

Indeed, fewer than one in four young people reported receiving support and advice on their apprenticeship from a teacher or lecturer (22%), or from a careers advisor (17%).

Instead, more than three in five young people (63%) found out about their options using the internet, and more than a third (36%) from their friends and family.

*Before starting your apprenticeship(s), where did you find out about the options available to you? (n=400)*



While both the internet and friends and family can be valid and useful sources of information, they should never have to act as a replacement for professional advice and support.

The internet provides a wealth of information; however, this can be difficult to navigate for some young people, as they are faced with a multitude of websites, often providing different or sometimes even conflicting advice.

While the Government has made attempts to rectify this with the introduction of their 'GET IN GO FAR' website, speaking to young people reveals that more still needs to be done to publicise the website, promote the benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship and support young people with the process of applying.

In addition, while friends and family can provide useful information when they have prior experience of navigating the apprenticeship system, often, this is not the case, and the advice given is either uninformed or out-dated.

While often unintentional, receiving insufficient, unreliable or out-dated advice can lead to a young person entering on to an unsuitable course, which does not fully match their needs, expectations or ambitions.

Young people relying on friends and family for advice, and support in some cases, will also have to navigate the stereotypes and negative preconceptions that so often accompany apprenticeships.

Indeed, speaking to young people reveals countless tales of encountering disappointed family members, friends and teachers when they decided to pursue an apprenticeship.

While the majority found that this disappointment subsided once they began their course and illustrated the benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship, the initial negativity can be a barrier for young people, especially if they lack confidence.

*“I did a course last year... I’m still close to the team and that. When I told them I was dropping out of college [to do an apprenticeship], they were very upset with me, but helped me write out my CV and stuff.”*

Laura, 19, Sandwell

*“I think it’s frowned upon. Like, when I left college, it was seen that I was a failure and I was taking the easy option. I think they’re not made a massive exciting thing that they could be. People just think it’s a really bad wage, it’s boring and you don’t get a good grade. They could be hyped up a little bit more.”*

Beth, 17, Somerset

The negativity experienced by young people illustrates that while the benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship are evident, they continue to be seen as a ‘second class’ option for many, or even no option at all.

While the ambitions of young people must be welcomed and encouraged whatever pathway they chose, it is time to end the common misconception that attending university is the only way to achieve success.

The notion is damaging and is delaying, or even preventing, many from undertaking an apprenticeship that will be beneficial to their future.

Indeed, speaking to young people reveals that many undertook a long and rocky journey before becoming an apprentice. As such, very few knew in school that they wanted to become an apprentice, and a significant number pursued a variety of alternative options prior to undertaking an apprenticeship.



A number of young people pursued the traditional path of attending college after school, simply because they either did not know what else to do, or because they felt pressured to attend. While a few completed their college courses, many either failed or dropped out when they realised that it was not the right option for them.

*“I was doing A-levels, I failed the first year twice, so realised that wasn’t for me. I was put off by teachers to become a teacher, so then I thought oh what’s next for me?”*

Georgia, 18, Northamptonshire

*“I probably wouldn’t have bothered with my A-Levels, I didn’t do great. I mean it was a good experience, and maybe if I hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t be where I am now. But I wish I had gone straight into the apprenticeship and built from there.”*

Hayley, 20, Derbyshire

Again, it is important to nurture young people’s ambitions and allow them to follow the path of their choosing. However, it is equally important that this is an informed choice, and that young people are given all the necessary information to make it.

As such, providing young people with honest, impartial and professional advice at a young age can prevent some from taking unnecessarily long paths into an apprenticeship.

Providing young people with advice from a young age can also help them to make informed and strategic decisions about their future, ending the situation currently taking place, in which many young people are simply ‘falling’ into an apprenticeship.

In these circumstances, young people tend to undertake one of the first apprenticeships they find, or enter into one through a suggestion from someone known to them.

While many in these circumstances reported a positive experience, simply ‘falling’ into an apprenticeship increases the likelihood that a young person will enter onto an unsuitable course due to being unaware of their options, or enter on to a course that fails to uphold the basic principles of an apprenticeship.

*“My mother basically told me that I needed to get a job and that was the first thing I seen, so I applied for it. But I didn’t really get any other support at all, other than my mum.”*

Carlie, 26, Swansea

*“I found it on Facebook. I was generally looking for apprenticeships in fabrication and welding or jobs. I was thinking of going back in the army, but this popped up.”*

Arron, 20, Nottinghamshire

The need for more information is illustrated by the fact that more than a third of young people (34%) felt more could be done to improve the amount of support and advice available to them prior to undertaking an apprenticeship.

*“Apprenticeships are always advertised as a brand new thing... You see the adverts with people laughing, but there is no knowledge saying it will be tough, but this will be your end result. Even college didn’t make reference to the fact that it’ll be so well recognised amongst employers.”*

Amy, 20, Norfolk

*“I think I would have liked to know about apprenticeships in school first, like, earlier, rather than everything being focussed on GCSEs and that being the be all and end all of everything, because I didn’t get them.”*

Catherine, 18, Swansea

However, the information given to young people should also extend beyond that given by traditional careers advisors.

Instead, professional careers advice should be supplemented with information given by employers and training providers about the realities of working and studying, and the opportunities available.

It is important, therefore, that the responsibility of informing young people is not placed solely on schools and colleges, but instead, an obligation is also placed on employers and training providers to actively engage and enter into educational institutions, helping to promote apprenticeships and encourage participation.

In addition, employers should work with schools to provide quality work experience opportunities to young people, allowing them to gain an insight into their chosen career before committing to undertake an apprenticeship.

Only half of young people (50%) had any previous experience in the field prior to undertaking their apprenticeship.

While prior experience in a field is not always a necessary prerequisite for success, it can help a young person choose the right course for them and increase the chance of completion and progression.

In addition, without proper guidance, support and experience, a young person can quickly become trapped in an unnecessary ‘cycle’ of undertaking low-level qualifications that do little to help them progress in their careers, but instead, succeed in making them become despondent and unmotivated.

Indeed, a quarter of those pursuing a Level 2 qualification at age 17 are still working towards a qualification of the same level a year later, and 8% have moved down a level.<sup>10</sup>

Providing young people with support, advice and experience early on increases the chance of pursuing the right option for them the first time around, allowing them to progress quicker.

Furthermore, it is important that those who have left school have the same access to such quality support, advice and experience, particularly when experiencing periods of unemployment.

Speaking to young people reveals countless instances where they have been pressured into unsuitable or irrelevant training courses by job centres.

*“Going to the Jobcentre, they would deter me at every single path. They’d be like ‘apply for this job’. ‘Er, no Barbara, do I look like I want to work at Poundland?’ They kept trying to force me into rubbish jobs that I’d probably have come out of in the next year, come back on to the dole and it’ll come round in full circle. I don’t just want a job, I want a lifelong career. So, it did feel like a constant battle.”*

Stephen, 18, Sandwell

In such instances, young people’s ambitions and long-term careers are sacrificed for short-term employment opportunities that do little to help them sustain employment and progress.

It is important that a young person’s employment status and financial situation does not prevent them from undertaking those opportunities open to others. In order to help them overcome these barriers, it is critical that job centre staff are equipped with the necessary information to help support a young person onto an apprenticeship.

#### Recommendations:

##### 1. Providing improved access to specialist careers advice and information relating to apprenticeships

- ▶ Careers guidance within schools and colleges should be provided by professional advisors.
- ▶ Employers and training providers of apprentices from the local community should be brought into schools and colleges more frequently to advise students.
- ▶ Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches should be provided with improved training and information on apprenticeships.
- ▶ Parents, guardians and carers should be provided with targeted information and materials on apprenticeships to help advise young people about their post-16 progression routes.

##### 2. Extending work experience opportunities to better prepare young people for apprenticeships

- ▶ Young people should be guaranteed access to at least three weeks of meaningful work experience while at school.

##### 3. Developing further campaigns to promote apprenticeships in schools and colleges

- ▶ Schools and colleges should be given materials to run activities and campaigns to promote the benefits of apprenticeships.

## Balancing work and study

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Apprenticeships are designed to combine both on and off-the-job training, providing young people with the opportunity to earn a qualification while gaining practical experience.

However, despite this, almost a quarter of former apprentices (24%) said they found it difficult to balance the study and work elements of their apprenticeship.

While minimum standards on guided learning hours are in place, speaking to young people highlights how varied apprenticeships can be, and the different formats that they take.

It is recognised that an element of difference is to be expected, given the range of subjects and levels of apprenticeships being undertaken. However, these different formats can have a profound effect on the experience of an apprentice. This effect includes the ease with which they balance the work and study elements of their apprenticeship.

The primary factor underlying an apprentice's experience tends to be the priority the employer places on studying.

As such, experiences tend to differ between those apprentices who are given designated study days in college; those who are given designated time at work to complete their studies; those who are expected to fit studying in around their day-to-day tasks in working hours; and those who are expected to complete their studies in their personal time outside of work hours.

Those young people with designated study days generally reported the most ease with balancing work and study, as the two elements were clearly distinguished and they were able to access support and advice around their studies. This was both from tutors and from peers.

While isolated cases existed in which young people reported pressure from employers not to attend their college days, in general, these apprentices reported a high priority given to study by their employers, which allowed them to manage their time more easily and meet both sets of commitments.

Similarly, those given designated time in work to undertake their studies generally reported an increased ease when trying to balance work and study. However, many also reported feeling quite isolated, especially when working at an organisation in which they were the only apprentice.

As such, some apprentices reported struggling to complete their studies without the proper guidance and support that those who attended college gained from their tutors and peers. This was compounded in situations where an assessor's visits were infrequent and the majority of learning was done online, resulting in individuals often going weeks without receiving face-to-face feedback about their progress in relation to the study element of their apprenticeship.

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*“The assessor comes into the workplace and sees you and tells you what you’ve got to do that month and then just kind of goes... It’s difficult not having a day off to go to a college, to have someone help you and teach you. It’s a lot of sitting at a computer and researching.”*

Stephen, 18, Sandwell

The ability of a young person to complete their studies alone in these circumstances will differ between individuals, dependent on their academic abilities and history. As such, creating an apprenticeship system that works for all often requires more than a time commitment from employers for studying. Instead, active support and guidance is necessary to ensure that no one is put at a disadvantage and that all can achieve the requirements to proceed.

*“It was ‘find external training courses and go on those’ or it was ‘YouTube it’, because there were no lessons on how to do it. In my opinion, that’s kind of the whole point of an apprenticeship. You get taught how to do it and then you do it.”*

Poppy, 21, Norfolk

Those young people reporting the most difficulty balancing work and study were usually either required to complete their studying alongside their day-to-day work or even after work on weekends and evenings.

Studying alongside work proved particularly difficult for those young people working for employers who required them to take on additional responsibilities to those originally agreed when the apprenticeship began.

While many relished the opportunity to play a more active role in the organisation and gain additional skills, often, this was done at the expense of their studies. This meant they were often rushing to complete tasks on time, and not completing them to the best of their ability.

This problem was exacerbated in situations where an apprentice was working in a small team and left to manage the workload alone, or working in a seasonal industry that had busy peak-times, requiring additional working hours to be undertaken.

*“I had a two-week induction where I had to know everything. The manager who trained me up and left, so I was often on my own and I kind of developed the role as well. Throughout the year, I have taken on more and more and more. At the end of the apprenticeship, I was doing a lot more than I was told I was meant to be doing. Nine times out of 10, I was the only one in the office during the day.”*

Amy, 20, Norfolk

In such instances, the role of an apprentice can often become blurred between an individual undertaking training and a full-time member of staff. Again, while this is often a good opportunity for the apprentice to gain skills, it can prove detrimental to their studies and place an additional burden on them.

The blurring between roles becomes even more prominent in instances where a young person is expected to work full-time and undertake their studies during their evenings and weekends.

*“I think it would be better if we had time inside work to do coursework. I know with others, and even me, sometimes I am really busy outside of work.”*

Beth, 17, Somerset

*“With my Level Two and my Level Three, I done all the studying at home. I didn’t do it at work at all. The only piece I had done was when I had the assessor out, and that was only about an hour a month. Towards the end, it upped to maybe two or three times a month. I don’t really know how I did it to be honest.”*

Poppy, 21, Norfolk

Requiring an apprentice to undertake the entirety of their studies in their own time undermines the purpose of an apprenticeship. It also puts the young person at a distinct disadvantage to those who are afforded time at work or at college to complete their studies, as many struggle to fit them in around existing commitments.

In some instances, the added pressure this puts on a young person results in a negative impact on their health and wellbeing.

The obligation to undertake studies outside of work also often requires a young person to have access to a computer and the internet. Those individuals who do not have this access have an inherent disadvantage, as they struggle to access the appropriate technology in order to complete assignments and fulfil their study commitments.

The extent of the problem in balancing work and study is illustrated by the fact that more than a third of young people (34%) said they would have liked to have spent more time studying.

In addition, the same proportion of young people (34%) also said that apprenticeships could be enhanced by improving the quality of the study element.

Both creating a balance between work and study and ensuring quality is embedded in the system requires effective communication between the employer and the training provider to ensure that the needs of young people are met.

While this communication is inevitably easier in instances where the study and employment elements are delivered by the same organisation, it is important that the commitment to both is maintained, as the potential for mistreatment still exists.

Indeed, a number of young people reported the difficulties they faced when conflicts arose between employer priorities and study and assessment needs.

As such, some reported difficulty fitting in observation and assessment time, and even when this was found, they were still required to undertake their day-to-day work duties like answering the phone and speaking to customers.

*“Even when my college tutor was there, I was having to answer the phone, write messages, welcome people into the building. Even when she was there and we were trying to do things, I was having to work because there was no one else about. We didn’t have that separation. There was no set time. We had to fight a bit, to say we have to do an observation.”*

Amy, 20, Norfolk

*“I started in the summer, so I was thrown straight into it, and it was a really busy period. I didn’t get that much help with my coursework because I didn’t see my assessor a lot. Now it’s a lot better because I have got the support I need from the assessor, who comes in every two weeks.”*

Charlie, 18, Somerset

At present, a young person is required to sign an Apprenticeship Agreement before beginning their course, as introduced under the *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (ASCLA)*. However, this agreement is merely designed to identify the skill, trade or occupation for which the apprentice is being trained, and confirm the qualifying apprenticeship framework that they are following.

In order to ensure that quality is embedded into the system, and ensure that the principles of an apprenticeship are not being undermined, an enhanced Apprenticeship Agreement should be introduced. This enhanced agreement should include information on the rights and responsibilities of all parties, and information about the breakdown between the work and study elements of an apprenticeship.

The difficulties currently faced by young people is reflective of the fact that more than two in five (41%) said that the way to improve apprenticeships was to encourage better communications between work and training providers.

Effective communication between the two will also help to cement the distinction between work and study. While a level of fluidity between these two elements is inevitably necessary, this communication can act as a check to ensure that both sides are meeting their responsibilities and enabling young people to succeed.

An enhanced Apprenticeship Agreement would help to facilitate this communication, and enable each party to hold the others accountable if it is not being met.

Crucially, the apprentice needs to be involved in such communications, affording them the opportunity to raise any concerns about their apprenticeship and ask for any additional support that may be required.

The problems faced when trying to balance work and study are often compounded in instances when young people have to undertake additional courses in functional skills in order to meet recent government standards.<sup>11</sup>

Often, young people undertaking these courses in English, maths and ICT reported receiving little support, and instead were made to undertake independent study on top of their apprenticeship work.

While a drive to improve standards is welcomed, it is clear that such requirements are putting an additional burden on young people that many are struggling to cope with.

*“One of my biggest challenges was having to retake some of the exams I had to do. Especially with my Level Three, I had to do my maths again, and that was never a strong point for me at school. So having to do it again, it didn’t make a lot of sense.”*

Fiona, 23, Nottinghamshire

*“I am doing functional skills in ICT and maths. I struggle quite a bit with time management, so for me, it’s quite hard, balancing the workload.”*

Bethany, 20, London

Given that many of these individuals did not manage to achieve an A\*-C GCSE result in these subjects while in full-time education and with teacher support, it seems that distance learning provided on top of employment and studying time is unlikely to prove successful for the majority. This is particularly true when employers fail to support the young person and account for the additional time that functional skills courses require.

Indeed, data shows that less than one third of 16 to 18 year olds entered to retake English and maths GCSEs go on to achieve a grade C or above.<sup>12</sup>

The need for an additional functional skills element to apprenticeships is often indicative of a wider problem of young people not being adequately prepared for the world of work during their time at school.

Indeed, employers are increasingly reporting that young people lack the necessary skills needed to adequately function in the workplace. Critically, these extend beyond the functional skills of maths, English and ICT to elements of team working, self-management and communication skills.

While the training provided during an apprenticeship itself is important, it is clear that interventions must start earlier and focus on providing young people with the vital functional and soft skills they need before entering on to a course, to help maximise their chances of success.

Firstly, these interventions must target those in school who are less likely to succeed, raising attainment levels and allowing them an equal chance of success as they undertake an apprenticeship.



Secondly, these interventions must include a number of stakeholders, including employers, schools and young people themselves, to help ensure that the education system effectively equips individuals with the skills and competencies they need at an early age.

#### Recommendations:

#### 4. Requiring designated and structured study time within apprentices' working hours

- ▶ Employers, and, where appropriate, training providers, should be required to set out and agree with apprentices the breakdown between work and study time and how these should be structured, within an enhanced Apprenticeship Agreement.

#### 5. Facilitating young people to develop their functional skills alongside their apprenticeship

- ▶ Schools should be provided with additional funding to provide early interventions and targeted support for young people not meeting national attainment levels in functional skills.
- ▶ Employers should be required to provide young people undertaking functional skills courses with designated and structured study time, in addition to their standard study time.

# Wages and living costs

The ability to earn a wage while learning is a key motivation of young people undertaking an apprenticeship. It is this opportunity to receive a salary that distinguishes apprenticeships from many other pathways available to young people.

Indeed, almost two thirds of young people (63%) said the reason they undertook an apprenticeship was because it was an opportunity to get paid while learning, making it the primary motivator for young people.

It is recognised that the lower wages afforded to apprentices are both an incentive for employers to take on those who are less skilled, and a recognition that they are still in training.

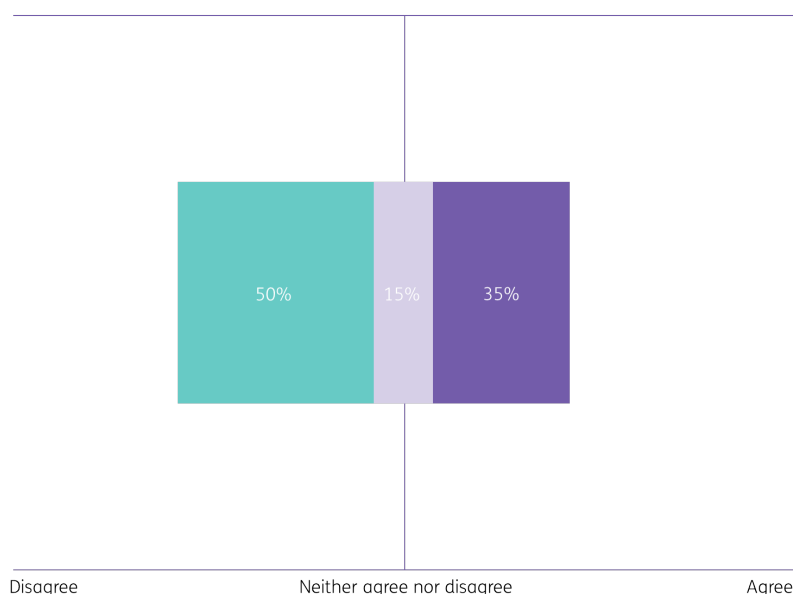
However, while many are attracted to the idea of being paid, the reality of living on an apprenticeship wage can prove challenging for some young people.

Wages tend to vary significantly; more than two in five young people (41%) reported earning less than £4 an hour during their apprenticeship.

Speaking to young people reveals that a young person's ability to live on the apprenticeship wage was very much dependent on their circumstances.

However, the extent of the problem is illustrated by the fact that only just over a third of former apprentices (35%) said the salary they received enabled them to afford their basic living costs.

*To what extent do you agree with: The salary I got while an apprentice enabled me to afford my basic living costs? (N=400)*



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Those living at home with family support reported a more positive experience of living on the wage, as the majority of their salary was available as disposable income. In such cases, the reliance on family support was recognised, with many young people stating they would not be able to manage on the wage if they lived independently and without this support.

*“It was difficult, because obviously, it was only £400 a month. But both times, I was living with my Mum, because obviously, we had a little agreement and I didn’t have to pay too much rent. But If I wasn’t living at home, I wouldn’t have been able to do it.”*

Heather, 24, Cambridgeshire

*“Working on it, I mean it’s a bit hard. £450 and if you’re living by yourself, it’s quite a struggle.”*

George, 20, Lincolnshire

*“The wage isn’t really enough because I can’t pay keep in the house and I can’t do the things I want to do really without worrying about money.”*

Catherine, 18, Swansea

However, many of those who were unable to rely on family support reported increased levels of difficulty, as their wages have to cover basic necessities including rent and utility bills. Importantly, this included both those who lived independently and those who lived at home but had to contribute to household bills and costs.

*“It can get a bit struggling. I have to pay the rent and electricity. But I just scrimp and save and manage. Just about.”*

Laura, 19, Sandwell

*“Any money I had, I had to pay for my own food, electric, rent and all that. Everything I had went out. I’d end up with like a fiver in my pocket at the end of the week.”*

Marcus, 20, Cheshire

While a reliance on family support is not in itself inherently negative, given the age of some young apprentices, it is clear that the low wages associated with apprenticeships can provide an insurmountable barrier for those who are forced to be financially independent, whether that be in the family home or where circumstances mean they have to live independently.

Those facing financial pressures were sometimes forced to undertake part-time or weekend work alongside their apprenticeship, adding to the burden placed on a young apprentice and putting them at a disadvantage to their counterparts.

*“Any money was better than nothing. At the time, I had a part-time job. When I first started, I was also doing four days a week then the other three days a week in catering, which topped me up. I hated it, but it kept me going.”*

Poppy, 21, Norfolk

In other instances, young people forego apprenticeships altogether, as financial pressures force them down alternative paths.

Given the opportunities that apprenticeships provide for young people, the apprenticeship system should work for all young people, and no one should be excluded due to affordability and financial concerns.

A particular cost pressure identified by young apprentices surrounded travel. Such costs were deemed to be particularly debilitating when a young person had to travel long distances to their apprenticeship or training provider, and had to rely on public transport.

While discount schemes do exist, these are not universally known about and do not apply to all forms of transport.

*“I lived half an hour away from work so I had to travel to work. So I had to factor in that I needed a car and to pay for petrol or have to get the bus. It could be quite expensive. At one stage, I was working but not actually getting any money.”*

Heather, 24, Cambridgeshire

*“I was paying monthly for the bus. I think it worked out at £50. It’s fine, but when you’re getting paid the apprenticeship wage, it’s a big chunk out of it.”*

Hayley, 20, Derbyshire

The wages young people receive and the costs they accrue must also be viewed in regards to the work that they undertake.

At their heart, apprenticeships are designed as a means by which young people can be trained, learn the skills they need to gain a sustainable job, and progress in their chosen career.

However, speaking to young people reveals that many are being asked to take on increasing levels of responsibility, sometimes equivalent to that undertaken by other full-time members of staff for significantly lower wages.

These additional responsibilities are often combined with a reduction in the time given to a young person to undertake their studies, meaning that this element has to be undertaken in their personal time outside normal working hours.

*“They were paying you under the minimum apprenticeship wage and expecting you to do more hours than what you’re meant to do. Then when it came to doing the coursework, the tutors weren’t really helping you and just shoving it in your face.”*

Arron, 20, Nottinghamshire

*“I took so much on. People were off, people were on holiday, people had to reduce their hours. I was then taking their workload as well, doing what I could to help them. I just feel like I was doing a normal job with a course alongside it. I did think a few times, this is a bit cheap, being paid £3.33 an hour for doing a lot more than my job description was.”*

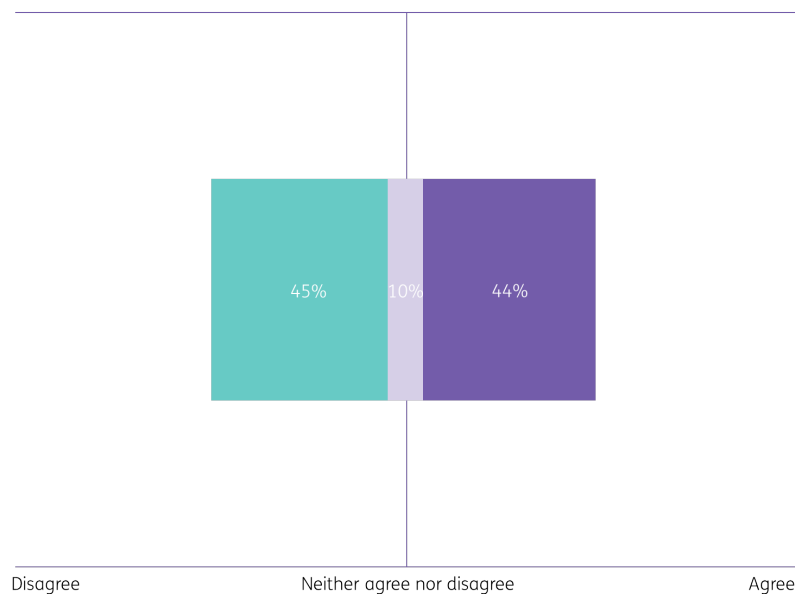
Amy, 20, Norfolk

*“You don’t get near enough money for what you do. Nowhere near. I wouldn’t think that you should get a lot, like, a great deal of money. But I do think you should get minimum wage. Like, fair play, you are learning a trade, but you need to live.”*

Marcus, 20, Cheshire

The extent of the problem is illustrated by the fact that fewer than half of young people (44%) believed the salary they got as an apprentice was reasonable for the work they did and the training they received.

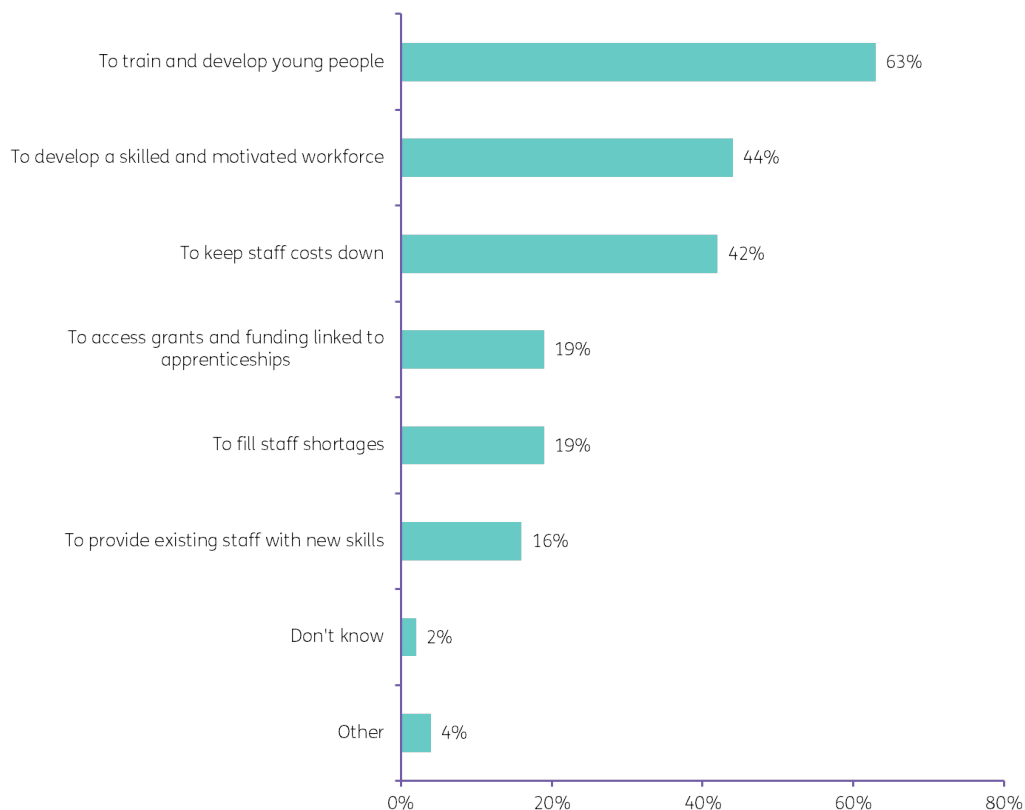
*To what extent do you agree with: The salary I got while an apprentice was reasonable for the work I did and the training I received? (N=400)*



It is important, therefore, that the wages afforded to apprentices are reasonable in respect to the work undertaken and the responsibilities held. However, any additional responsibilities held should not undermine the integrity of the apprenticeship and prevent a young person from completing their studies within their standard working hours.

This is important, given that more than two in five former apprentices (42%) said that they thought the reason that their employer hired apprentices was to keep costs down, and one in five (19%) said it was to access grants and funding linked to apprenticeships and to fill staff shortages.

*Why do you think the employer you trained for hires apprentices? (n=400)*



The impressions of young people are likely linked to the fact that more than one in five former apprentices (22%) said that they did not feel valued by their employer while undertaking their apprenticeship.

While many recognise apprenticeships as an investment in themselves and as a means to achieving their longer-term goals, a combination of not feeling valued and low apprenticeship wages can create a feeling of resentment among young people.

This resentment is often exacerbated in instances where a young person does not feel like they are receiving adequate training, or time to complete their studies, as part of their apprenticeship.

In addition, this resentment is particularly apparent when a young person compares their wages with their peers who moved immediately into work, even when this is in a minimum wage job.

*“Yeah, overall, it’s been OK. But yeah, to start off with, getting £2.78 was quite depressing. I could go and earn more in a coffee shop. I can see why people are put off by the apprenticeship wage.”*

Poppy, 21, Norfolk

*“I was thinking the other day. I have had jobs in the past where I have earned a lot more and I’ve done less hours for more money. So I’m having to get used to it.”*

Stephen, 18, Sandwell

Furthermore, there is the perception that students at universities are better off financially due to loans and, in some instances, maintenance grants. While the actuality of this is very much dependent on personal circumstances and a student will be left with longer-term debt, for those living on an apprenticeship wage, there can be resentment over the more positive immediate financial situation of some students.

Accordingly, 61% of young people said the way to improve apprenticeships is to increase the pay they are offered.

Given the extent of the negativity surrounding pay held by many undertaking apprenticeships, it is clear that perceptions of low pay act as a barrier for young people who would otherwise look to undertake an apprenticeship.

While a large part of this barrier is linked to the affordability of apprenticeships, for some, there is also the perception that they could earn more immediately by entering into employment.

Although these young people would inevitably benefit financially longer-term from undertaking an apprenticeship, the short-term needs and desires take over. This is particularly likely in instances where young people are from lower socio-economic groups and face additional financial pressures.

As already mentioned, it is important that young people are provided with the professional advice and support needed while in school to help them develop and decide their longer-term goals and aspirations. When this is provided, the long-term benefits of an apprenticeship can be prioritised more easily over the short-term gains of a larger starting salary.

*“When I was younger, I thought they were not the right thing I wanted to get involved with... I don’t think they are perceived as a main job. A lot of time, you can have them as a set amount of time, then not be taken on for the job. It’s a scary factor to take in. That it might not lead to a job after all the time of being on a low income wage.”*

George, 20, Lincolnshire

*“It was a route to something higher, and I didn’t have the qualifications. I didn’t want to get stuck in a job, but have no options to improve. I eventually want to be a nurse and this’ll allow me to do that... It’s a good route upwards and it’s more practical. I love it.”*

Laura, 19, Sandwell

However, while low wages are intended to be a temporary measure while undergoing training, in a number of cases, young people are failing to realise the benefit of an increase in salary in the first few years after completing an apprenticeship.

Accordingly, nearly a quarter of young people (23%) reported not earning any more now than they did before their apprenticeship.

Young people are less likely to be willing to undertake an apprenticeship if there is no perceived, or actual, longer-term financial benefit.

As such, it is important that quality is embedded into all apprenticeships to ensure that they are effective in providing young people with the skills and knowledge they need to enter into their chosen field, and to progress within that field, both in their responsibilities and salary.

In addition, it is important that the benefits of completing an apprenticeship are effectively communicated to young people, including the financial benefits. However, often, the information collected on the benefits of an apprenticeship is sporadic and inaccessible to a young person.

To help rectify this, and to encourage more young people to undertake an apprenticeship, the Government should commission a study to illustrate the financial benefits of completing an apprenticeship and promote the results to young people in a clear and accessible manner.

#### Recommendations:

##### 6. Offering targeted discounts to young apprentices to help with basic living costs

- ▶ Employers should offer employee benefits to apprentices, such as subsidised food and health discount schemes, where these are in place.
- ▶ The Government should provide all apprentices with details of national discount schemes, such as the NUS Apprenticeships Discount Card and Young Person's Railcard.
- ▶ Transport providers should provide free or heavily discounted travel schemes across their networks and different forms of public transport, for all young people undertaking an apprenticeship.

##### 7. Ensuring apprentices are appropriately remunerated for the work they undertake

- ▶ The Government should take targeted action against organisations paying below the National Apprentice Minimum Wage.
- ▶ Employers should ensure that any additional responsibilities taken on by a young person are reflected in their salary, and that these work requirements do not negatively impact the time afforded to the study element of an apprenticeship.

##### 8. Highlighting the financial benefits to young people undertaking an apprenticeship

- ▶ The Government should commission a study examining the benefits of completing an apprenticeship.



# Conclusions and recommendations

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Apprenticeships are providing very real benefits for young people, affording them the opportunity to earn a wage while gaining the skills they need to find sustainable employment and to progress in their chosen field.

However, despite these benefits, it is clear that apprenticeships continue to be seen as a 'second class' option for many young people, or even no option at all.

While the Government's attempts to increase the number of apprenticeships is welcomed, it is clear that inherent weaknesses exist in the system. These are hindering the experiences of young apprentices and, importantly, acting as a barrier to participation for others.

Addressing these weaknesses requires quality to be embedded into the system. It requires a partnership between different stakeholders and it requires the needs of young people being met.

In order to achieve this, the voices of young people must be listened to, their experiences must be respected, and their recommendations must be implemented.

To be truly effective, both economically and socially, the apprenticeship system must be one that works for all. It must be from which no one is excluded or deterred based on background or personal circumstance.

Accordingly, based on the views and experiences of the young people participating in this research, YMCA is recommending:

- ▶ Providing improved access to specialist careers advice and information relating to apprenticeships
- ▶ Extending work experience opportunities to better prepare young people for apprenticeships
- ▶ Developing further campaigns to promote apprenticeships in schools and colleges
- ▶ Requiring designated and structured study time within an apprentice's working hours
- ▶ Facilitating young people to develop their functional skills alongside their apprenticeship
- ▶ Offering targeted discounts to young apprentices to help with basic living costs
- ▶ Ensuring apprentices are appropriately remunerated for the work they undertake
- ▶ Highlighting the financial benefits to young people undertaking an apprenticeship.

# Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Sainsbury D, *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education*, April 2016
- <sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics, *UK Labour Market Statistics*, March 2017
- <sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics, *UK Labour Market Statistics*, March 2017
- <sup>4</sup> Sainsbury D, *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education*, April 2016
- <sup>5</sup> Welsh Government, *Aligning the Apprenticeship model to the needs of the Welsh economy*, February 2017
- <sup>6</sup> Queen's Speech 2015 available <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/queens-speech-2015>
- <sup>7</sup> Department for Education and Skills Funding Agency, *Apprenticeships by geography, equality & diversity and sector subject area: starts 2002/03 to 2016/17 reported to date*, January 2017
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- <sup>12</sup> Allen R, *Repeat After 'E': the treadmill of post-16 GCSE maths and English retakes*, August 2016



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