



## Experiencing the Transition from an Apprenticeship to Higher Education

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# Experiencing the Transition from an Apprenticeship to Higher Education

Words: 7,393

For Peer Review Only

**ABSTRACT**

It is the intention of the UK government to enhance progression routes for apprentices to higher education. However, little research has been carried out into why former apprentices pursue higher education or the experiences of this transition. This paper seeks to redress this gap by reporting three case studies of former apprentices who had completed or were completing a higher education in England. Each case study represents a different route to higher education: progressing to a full time higher education course; pursuing a part time route to sustain full time employment; and undertaking a career change during the transition to higher education. The paper addresses their experiences of the apprenticeship, the decision-making to progress and the perceived outcomes of their transition so far. Analysis draws on Fuller and Unwin's expansive-restrictive framework and conceptual lenses for understanding learning. The findings revealed that although their apprenticeships were restrictive in different ways, progression was pursued for a number of reasons involving the context in which apprenticeships were completed, the relationship to their employer and their understanding of learning. Experiences of boundary crossing were particularly associated with more complex descriptions of personal transformation and learning as becoming.

Keywords: Apprenticeship, higher education, transition, learning

## INTRODUCTION

The apprenticeship as a model of learning has a long and complex history. Since the late 1970s, apprenticeships in the UK have been used increasingly as an instrument of government policy, firstly to control young people and secondly as part of new legislation to keep them in some form of education or training until the age of 18 (Fuller and Unwin 2009). For example, the social benefits of apprenticeships emphasised in one government paper included that people between the ages of 16-18 were less likely to behave anti-socially, be involved in crime or go to prison (DfES 2007). The post-1979 period witnessed the introduction of ‘youth training schemes’, a state-run version of apprenticeship. Then, in 1993, the Modern Apprenticeship scheme was launched, which gave the state a direct role in funding apprenticeships (Fuller and Unwin 1998) and in 2004 the Modern Apprenticeship was rebranded Apprenticeships (Brockmann, Clarke and Winch 2010).

This paper refers to ‘apprenticeship’ in the way that it is used to describe programmes supported by the government. The government-funded programmes including Intermediate Apprenticeships (formally ‘Foundation Apprenticeships’) leading to level 2 qualifications, Advanced Apprenticeships (formally ‘Advanced Modern Apprenticeships’) leading to level 3 qualifications and ‘Higher Apprenticeships’ at level 4 and 5 (Brockmann, Clarke and Winch 2010). Apprenticeships are configured as frameworks designed by Sector Skills Councils rather than qualifications. This research was conducted in 2010 when it was specified that all apprenticeships must include a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) (competency-based), a

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3 Technical Certificate (knowledge-based), functional skills (numeracy and literacy) and a module  
4 on employment rights and responsibilities (Skills Commission 2009)<sup>1</sup>.  
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10 Research into apprenticeships has related particularly to learning and participation (Fuller and  
11 Unwin 2009; Fuller et al. 2005), learner identities (Brockmann 2010), socialisation (Vickerstaff  
12 2007) and support (Spielhofer and Sims 2004). This has drawn attention to the many different  
13 approaches to UK apprenticeships which shape learning. Fuller and Unwin (2003) developed the  
14 expansive – restrictive framework to help categorise apprenticeships. Presented as a continuum,  
15 Fuller and Unwin (2003) argue that apprenticeships with expansive features, such as access to a  
16 range of qualifications including knowledge-based vocational qualifications, create a richer  
17 environment leading to ‘deep’ learning. Restrictive features, such as completing transition as  
18 quickly as possible, curtail the opportunities that an apprenticeship can offer resulting in ‘surface’  
19 learning. In other words, the features of an apprenticeship shed light on the conditions of  
20 learning. While ‘surface’ learning involves learning facts and acquiring information, ‘deep’  
21 learning is a means to understanding reality and abstract meaning (Lemanski 2011).  
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41 Indeed, the ‘quality’ of the more restricted apprenticeships has been a concern to those seeking  
42 high-quality learning in apprenticeship (Fuller and Unwin 2003; Brockmann 2012). Whilst  
43 apprentices might be involved in various activities such as residential courses, visits from an  
44 external training provider and moving around company departments, for many the apprenticeship  
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52 <sup>1</sup>In 2011 standards stated that frameworks must specify the total number of credits which an apprentice must attain  
53 on the Qualifications and Credits Framework (QCF) and the number of Guided Learning Hours (GLH) that an  
54 apprentice must receive to complete the framework. An integrated qualification could also be offered combining  
55 competence and technical knowledge elements (BIS 2011a).  
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3 has involved only narrow sets of activities providing the minimum of underpinning knowledge  
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5 (Brockmann, Clarke and Winch 2010). In particular, debates about apprenticeship models in  
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7 England have often been linked to discussion about the NVQ. Described as the most heavily  
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9 criticised vocational qualifications framework in the world (Young 2011), the NVQ is one  
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11 qualification delivered as part of an apprenticeship but denigrated mainly because it separates  
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13 outcomes and assessment from knowledge of the learning process (Brockmann et al. 2010). In  
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15 worst cases, so-called apprentices were found to be existing employees that gained an NVQ for  
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17 work they were already doing (Fuller and Unwin 2009). The level at which apprentices  
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19 complete their training has also been called into question. For example, Ryan and Unwin (2001)  
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21 commented on the fact that only 50% of those leaving apprenticeships acquire level 3 or above,  
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23 which compares poorly to apprentices in Germany, where a 76% level 3 qualification acquisition  
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25 is reported. More recently, a government research paper suggested that many adult apprentices  
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27 enrolled on level 2 and 3 learning have already attained level 2 before starting their  
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29 apprenticeship (BIS 2011b).  
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39 The announcement by government in 2010 to invest over 600 million pounds a year into  
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41 apprenticeships came at a time of economic downturn in England (BIS 2010). Nevertheless, the  
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43 government expressed a wish to continue its focus upon progression within and beyond the  
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45 programme. As the strategy document *Skills for Sustainable Growth* pledged:  
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48 ‘We will not only increase numbers, but we will also improve the programme. As an  
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50 advanced economy needs advanced skills, we will reshape Apprenticeships so that  
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52 technician level – Level 3 – becomes the level to which learners and employers aspire. To  
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54 widen access, there will be clear progression routes into Level 3. Apprenticeships, and  
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3 routes from Level 3 Apprenticeships to higher level skills, including Level 4  
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5 Apprenticeships or Higher Education.’ (BIS 2010, 7)  
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8 However, despite a considerable increase in the number of people starting an apprenticeship in  
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10 England (Leitch 2006, 97), only low numbers have progressed from non-academic routes to  
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12 higher education (FDF/UVAC 2008; Skills Commission 2009; Milburn 2012). One reason for  
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14 this may be the lack of research into apprenticeship progression generally because the term  
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16 ‘apprenticeship’ is not a qualification in its own right and therefore tracking students is difficult.  
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22 Carter (2009) acknowledged that progression between level 3 vocational qualifications and  
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24 higher education in England is diverse and complex. For the purpose of this study, higher  
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26 education is the term adopted to encompass all accredited learning beyond level 3, so that it  
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28 includes not only full-time bachelor degrees but other higher level qualifications such as  
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30 Foundation degrees (level 5), NVQ levels 4 and 5, Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) / Higher  
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32 National Certificates (HNCs) and recognised professional qualifications that are not awarded by  
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34 higher education institutions. Table 1 shows levels 3 to 7 of the Framework for Higher  
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36 Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) / National  
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38 Qualifications Framework (NQF).  
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51 Higher education is regarded as important not just for the individuals who receive it but for the  
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53 economy (DIUS 2008). Consequently, considerable sums of Government funding in England  
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55 have supported agencies such as Aimhigher (a national programme set up to widen participation  
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3 in higher education) to help raise the aspirations of individual vocational learners considering  
4 higher education. Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) also invested much of their resources into  
5 mapping existing provision and forging progression agreements between further education (FE)  
6 colleges and higher education institutions (HEIs) (Carter 2009). Discussions about the impact of  
7 these initiatives continue despite the fact that they are now no longer funded (Harrison 2011).  
8 Yet some of the work completed has informed reports specifically addressing apprenticeship  
9 progression to higher education (Fuller and Unwin 2012; Fuller, Turbin and Wintrup 2010; Skills  
10 Commission 2009; Carter 2009). However, these have tended to explore the structural  
11 conditions for progression (e.g. pathways and access) rather than the lived experiences of those  
12 who have chosen this route. Furthermore, no study to the author's knowledge has investigated  
13 the perceived outcomes of progressing to higher education following an apprenticeship.  
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32 Attention to transition in higher education has attracted increasing interest in recent years (Guile  
33 and Young, 2003; Hultberg et al. 2008; Palmer, O'Kane and Owens 2009; Tobbell, O'Donnell  
34 and Zammit 2010). However, few studies have taken a critical approach to transition which has  
35 led to assumptions of fixed turning points. For example, concerns about the consequences of  
36 student attrition and failure upon university reputations and finances have led to studies  
37 exploring the first year experience of higher education (Palmer, O'Kane and Owens 2009), a  
38 period when students are said to be most vulnerable (McInnis 2001). There have also been  
39 noticeable changes in student engagement with higher education and an increase in more diverse  
40 backgrounds of first year students, so much so that calls have been made that the student learning  
41 environment and support should be reorganised (Hultberg et al. 2008). This paper adopts a  
42 flexible 'transition as becoming' account described by Gale and Parker (2012), which they argue,  
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3 has the most potential for new thinking in socially inclusive ways. Transition is defined broadly  
4 as ‘the capability to navigate change’ referring to students’ capabilities and resources to engage  
5 with change conditions but also to the capabilities of mobility, aspiration and voice.  
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12 How people make sense of their learning is complex. Hager and Hodkinson (2009) suggest that  
13 researchers and policymakers, in particular, employ particular lenses to explain learning. For  
14 example, the ‘propositional lens’ and the ‘skills lens’ regard what is learnt as a product that can  
15 be ‘moved’ from place to place so that it is independent of the context in which it is learnt. The  
16 difference is that whereas propositions enter the learner’s mind, ‘skills are things that somehow  
17 lodge in the learner’s body’ (Hager and Hodkinson 2009, 624). Another lens is ‘learning  
18 through participation’ which, rather than treating learning as a list of items to be acquired by all,  
19 views learning as a social activity significantly shaped by the context in which learning is  
20 experienced. The learning as transformation lens emphasises individual change and finally,  
21 ‘learning as becoming’ describes not only a change in the learner but in their environment. This  
22 takes into account that knowledge and skill can become changed within the person who has gone  
23 through and is going through a learning process. Furthermore, there is no end point to learning  
24 but rather it consists of a changing relational web in a process of ongoing change. This view,  
25 rather than treating the learner and what is learnt as separate, ‘connects the learner to the  
26 surrounding world in an evolving way’ (Hager and Hodkinson 2009, 631).  
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50 The ‘learning as becoming’ lens complements the ‘transition as becoming’ account because of its  
51 focus on ‘boundary crossing’, described more specifically as, ‘entering into territory in which we  
52 are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore, unqualified’ (Tuomi-Gröhn and  
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3 Engeström 2003, 4). Importantly, this focus also shifts the emphasis from the transfer of  
4 educational knowledge to people moving between different contexts (e.g. formal learning  
5 environments and work places). It is argued in this paper that this combination of lenses is  
6 important for understanding how individual learners experience transition from an apprenticeship  
7 to higher education.  
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## 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 **METHODOLOGY**

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20 The project reported here was part of a qualitative study consisting of seven in depth interviews  
21 with former apprentices who had undertaken or were undertaking a higher level qualification.  
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24 As data on apprentices who have progressed to HE is not easily available, the researcher worked  
25 with Aimhigher to invite individuals to participate in this study. The seven individuals contacted  
26 were those known to Aimhigher and who represented a variety of pathways. It was therefore a  
27 purposive sample chosen to satisfy the specific needs of the project (Robson 2011). The small  
28 sample enabled a detailed examination of the learning journeys of three men and four women of  
29 different ages working in different employment sectors. Semi-structured interviews took  
30 between one and a half to two hours and were held at locations convenient for the participant (e.g.  
31 workplace, college). The interviews with former apprentices aimed to (a) explore their  
32 experiences of an apprenticeship, (b) determine their reasons for progressing to higher education  
33 courses and (c) investigate the perceived outcomes of their transition. Specific questions  
34 included ‘what were your reasons for choosing your higher education course?’, ‘how do you  
35 think the course has benefitted you so far?’, ‘how does learning for a higher education course  
36 compare to learning during your apprenticeship?’ and ‘how do you feel about learning now?’  
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55 Ethical approval of this study was provided by the University ethics committee and all necessary  
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3 procedures were followed to ensure that participants were fully briefed about the purpose and  
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5 intention of the study and that they were aware of their right to withdraw at any time.  
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10 For the purpose of this paper, specific cases of three former apprentices in the South West of  
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12 England are drawn on to clearly illustrate how transition was experienced by individuals. The  
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14 cases were selected to represent distinct transitions from an apprenticeship to higher education:  
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16 Amber, after completing her apprenticeship progressed to higher education full time; Dave chose  
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18 a part time route enabling him to sustain full time employment; and Jo undertook a career change  
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20 during the transition to higher education. These represent the transition journeys experienced by  
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22 the original sample of seven interviewees and, it is suggested, are likely to represent journeys  
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24 experienced by other former apprentices who enter higher education.  
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32 The intention of the data analysis was not to make generalisations but to highlight and explore  
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34 the emerging themes and patterns. Initial analysis was carried out according to three broad  
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36 themes – ‘apprenticeship learning’, ‘motives to progress’ and ‘perceived outcomes’ whilst  
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38 remaining open to the discovery of new themes and categories as the process continued (Smith  
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40 and Osborn 2003). A second cycle of analysis was conducted making links to restrictive and  
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42 expansive features of apprenticeships as illustrated by Fuller and Unwin (2003) and to the  
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44 conceptual lenses for understanding learning described by Hager and Hodkinson (2009).  
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## 50 **FINDINGS**

### 51 **THE APPRENTICESHIP**

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3 During the interviews, the learners described what led them to embark on an apprenticeship and  
4 their experiences. Many of these descriptions, when compared to restrictive and expansive  
5 characteristics indicated many restrictive features. This is perhaps surprising given that these  
6 learners went on to higher education and there is a negative association between restrictive  
7 approaches to apprenticeship and the creation of opportunity for personal development and  
8 enhancing participation (Fuller and Unwin 2003). However, as the findings highlight, the  
9 contexts in which the apprenticeships operated also played an important part in facilitating  
10 transition.  
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#### 24 *Case study 1: Amber*

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26 As reported in other studies of apprentices (Brockmann 2010), Amber started her apprenticeship  
27 after experiencing some disappointment at school. At 16 years old Amber dropped out of 6<sup>th</sup>  
28 form because, ‘the teachers were too laid back, weren’t there enough, my timetable wasn’t very  
29 good so I just got bored so dropped out.’ She then worked full time at a restaurant managed by a  
30 husband and wife team and as she described, ‘we are all really close’. Despite her experiences  
31 at school, she did not reject formal learning altogether and instead sought to continue learning in  
32 other ways: ‘But I knew I had to learn, I cannot not learn anything, I have to – it was driving me  
33 nuts not doing work.’ This generally positive attitude towards learning was an important  
34 contributor to Amber’s decision making. Her original goal was to embark upon a course to gain  
35 some qualifications to support a career as a Restaurant Manager.  
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53 The notions of expansive and restrictive approaches can be useful for indicating conditions for  
54 learning. Amber’s apprenticeship was restrictive in the sense that she mentioned that she only  
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3 had access to competence-based qualifications, the NVQ levels 2 and 3 in hospitality. As  
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5 Brockmann and colleagues (2010, 117) note, to restrict in this way is, ‘neglecting the educational  
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7 development of the apprentice which is integral to continental programmes’. For example, the  
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9 first part of the apprenticeship was to complete an NVQ level 2 which she found, ‘I didn’t  
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11 actually need to do. Well, I didn’t educationally need to do the level 2 because I’ve got full  
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13 GCSEs – I’ve got a-c but because I’d never done an apprenticeship before you have to...’  
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15 Amber’s apprenticeship was also restricted in that learning was entirely on the job and assessors  
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17 visited her at work: ‘I’d be in my work placement I’d feel comfortable and like, my assessor  
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19 Nicky would just in the table in the corner and just observe me. So she’d see how I’d interact  
20  
21 with the customers and things like that.’ So there was no opportunity to move beyond her  
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23 existing parameters to encounter new learning possibilities and extend her learning horizon  
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25 (Fuller and Unwin 2003). Amber then progressed through Level 2 very quickly: ‘I did my level  
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27 2 in 6 months and it’s meant to take 12’. This is also regarded a restrictive feature limiting as it  
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29 does the amount of time for reflection and development. However, completing the NVQ level 3  
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31 of her apprenticeship appeared to have been a more expansive experience:  
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38 I found level 3 far more interesting than level 2. It was just more for my, I guess it was  
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40 learning new things whereas level 2 was just convincing the assessor that I knew things  
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42 already.  
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45 Rather than a continuous process, Amber regarded her apprenticeship as two parts, preferring the  
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47 new learning demanded by level 3. This is important as it suggests that Amber viewed learning  
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49 as more than a product independent of the learner and more an evolving process leading to  
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51 personal change (Hager and Hodkinson 2009).  
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3 *Case study 2: Dave*  
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5 Dave joined the Navy at 16 years old because, 'I didn't want to spend years studying at  
6 university etc'. He too achieved good GCSEs. Dave never indicated that he rejected learning  
7 particularly, just that he had not wanted to go to university and had not been 'keen on the idea of  
8 spending another three or four years in a classroom'. After one year he made the decision to  
9 leave the Navy and considered an apprenticeship because in his words, 'I was getting a  
10 qualification, I was being paid whilst I was doing it and I was also gaining experience'. In other  
11 words the apprenticeship attracted Dave by 'being attached to a real employer and doing some  
12 learning on the job' (McIntosh 2005, 252). After he approached the local college for information,  
13 he was put forward for an interview with the local city council where he began an apprenticeship  
14 in business administration.  
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32 Dave's apprenticeship had many similarities when compared to that of Amber. All learning took  
33 place at work and like Amber, he only referred to competence-based qualifications, both features  
34 of a restrictive apprenticeship. He also did not appear to have been particularly challenged by  
35 NVQ level 2. His description of the apprenticeship as 'the basic core skills that you need to be  
36 able to work in that environment' suggests using the skill learning lens, taking the view of  
37 learning as independent of the learner. Treating the environment as separate from skill  
38 development is also a popular assumption among those who adopt a skill learning lens. However,  
39 Dave also adopted the learning through participation lens, as illustrated by the ways in which he  
40 regarded his role within the council.  
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3 Dave's role at work whilst he completed the apprenticeship played an important part in his  
4 motivation to continue to higher education. Although there was no planned rotation, his  
5 administrative role at the council varied, consisting as it did of, 'general admin and business  
6 support, financial budget management and a fair bit of IT work'. This, he explained, 'was great  
7 and helped me when I finished the apprenticeship and I was looking to move on to the next  
8 step...' In other words, whilst Dave did not have access to multiple communities of practice  
9 outside the workplace, he appreciated that the role itself could give him the opportunity to extend  
10 his participation within the organisation. The potential to do so and become a full participant, as  
11 described by Fuller and Unwin (2003), was at the heart of his decision to undertake his  
12 apprenticeship.  
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29 *Case study 3: Jo*

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31 Jo embarked on her apprenticeship in administration when she was 16 years old whilst working  
32 as an office junior in a training department of a local construction company. Although she had  
33 planned to do her A levels, after two days she left 'to earn money'. As she explained when  
34 looking for her first job she had already decided, 'I want one with training because I want to  
35 progress. I don't want to go into a dead end job'. The apprenticeship consisted of one day a  
36 month out of the workplace. This one day a month was important for providing off-the-job  
37 provision, where participants have opportunities to discuss their work and have access to peer  
38 group interaction (Fuller and Unwin 2003). Unlike Amber and Dave, Jo worked in a department  
39 that encouraged training 'to lead by example'. Therefore, in addition to her NVQ level 2 and 3  
40 in administration, she obtained an NVQ level 3 in team leading, an assessor's award and  
41 undertook an award in preparing to teach in the lifelong sector (Pttls) course. As she stated:  
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3 I did so many short courses it was unbelievable and working for a training company, if  
4 no-one turned up for the training course that day they'd quite often put you on just to fill  
5 the spaces, so I've always quite liked my training, it keeps me busy in between other  
6 things that I'm doing.  
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12 In this way, Jo experienced a more expansive apprenticeship that enabled her to 'travel' outside  
13 the immediate community of practice...to engage in the sort of multiple membership which  
14 facilitates deeper learning, reflection and identity development' (Fuller and Unwin 2003, 422). In  
15 doing so she had the opportunities to extend her identity through boundary crossing between her  
16 workplace and her local training provider.  
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26 However, Jo was very clear that the NVQ levels 2 and 3 in administration were the  
27 apprenticeship and the other qualifications and training were additional. With regards to her  
28 NVQ level 2 in administration, she explained: 'I flew through it and then my admin 3 was about  
29 a year, my admin 2 was about eight months I think I did it in'. On its own, this may suggest a  
30 restrictive apprenticeship. However, the institutional emphasis on wider training provided Jo  
31 with an enhanced learning profile, benefitting from a combination of learning across different  
32 communities of practice and additional certification that she might not otherwise have accessed.  
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34 Interestingly Jo appeared to describe learning initially in terms of qualifications acquired, more  
35 in relation to the simplistic propositional learning lens. This was epitomised by her answer to  
36 how she felt about learning: 'getting a bit more to put on your CV, it's all worth having if you  
37 can get it'. This treats learning as a tool for furthering career prospects and neglects any wider  
38 impact on Jo personally.  
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3 One of the reasons for Jo's quick transition was the opportunity to claim exemption from certain  
4 aspects of her apprenticeship. Receiving exemption or accreditation of prior learning (APL) is  
5 common among work-based learning students accessing higher education (Boud, Solomon and  
6 Symes 2001) and often positively associated with recognising 'worth'. However, it has also  
7 been connected to concerns about confidence in academic study (Houlbrook 2012). Indeed, later  
8 Jo admitted that receiving exemptions for certain parts of her course did cause anxiety later:  
9 'teaching the key skills was something I was a little bit concerned about, because I'd never had  
10 to do them when I was on the apprenticeships because I'd kept on having exemptions.' In this  
11 way, APL appeared to limit rather than enable new learning.  
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27 All three of these case studies highlight the importance of context when discussing restrictive  
28 and expansive features of an apprenticeship. For Amber, the positive experiences of new  
29 learning and her desire to extend her learning horizon encouraged her to pursue higher education  
30 for her personal development. Dave was more interested in exploring the opportunities to  
31 improve his participation within his organisation and instead viewed learning as a means to this  
32 end. Jo's role within a training department meant she had access to wider institutional support  
33 for her learning taking her beyond the boundaries of her immediate workplace, enabling her to  
34 extend her learning horizon alongside her apprenticeship.  
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## 48 DECISION MAKING

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50 The following section discusses the process of decision making according to each learner.  
51 Building on the findings above, details about their motives help to illustrate their capabilities to  
52 navigate change and the mutuality of agency and structure that influenced this.  
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6 Amber, already presented as someone with a passion for learning, provided three additional  
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8 reasons for choosing to progress to a Foundation degree full time. Firstly, it was important for  
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10 her to feel confident about taking the next step. Concerns about ability to succeed in higher  
11  
12 education are common among students from vocational backgrounds, particularly in relation to  
13  
14 what it is to be academic (Houlbrook 2012). Amber's apprenticeship assessor was instrumental  
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16 in instilling in her the confidence to progress. She suggested that Amber attended the Open Day  
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18 where she met the programme leader who reassured her about the course requirements.  
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25 Secondly, Amber held an underlying belief that, 'degrees seem to be the way forward with  
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27 things'. She went on to say that, 'With my apprenticeship level 3 it would have been ok but it is  
28  
29 just not. It's not as solid as saying that you've got a full degree in Hospitality Management'.  
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31 Comparing qualifications in this way may signal what Reay (2001, 337) describes as 'confusions  
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33 and ambiguities about the sort of self they are seeking'. In other words, although these students  
34  
35 were engaging in higher education, Amber continued to demonstrate concern about how her  
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37 course related to others. This 'otherness' reflects the notions of deficit that remain, unchallenged  
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39 by the widening participation agenda (Burke 2012).  
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46 Finally, Amber had been frustrated to find that she wasn't able to put her learning into practice.  
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48 Although she had wanted opportunities to demonstrate the knowledge and understanding she had  
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50 gained from the apprenticeship in the restaurant, she was expected to continue with her duties,  
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52 including cleaning the restaurant. As she explained:  
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3 if I'd wanted to be cleaner that's what I'd do my degree in. but I'm doing it in hospitality  
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5 and I'm not learning anything from doing this so it was actually a massive release when I  
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7 knew I was going to do it full time and I knew I could drop all those rubbish hours and  
8  
9 the cleaning and stuff...  
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12 In other words, her practice was not changing to reflect her new learning and thus there seemed  
13  
14 to be limited reification of apprenticeship in her workplace. In other words, there was no attempt  
15  
16 to give Amber access to 'learning objects' and symbols which fell outside the mandatory  
17  
18 requirements of the apprenticeship (Fuller and Unwin 2003). This most probably stemmed  
19  
20 from the fact that Amber's workplace was a small, family-run restaurant with no history of  
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22 supporting apprentices. There was therefore only a very weak institutional infrastructure with no  
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24 commitment to a model.  
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32 Transition for Amber was triggered by a perceived imbalance between her individual needs and  
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34 those of her employer. Higher education offered her a way to break free from the confines of her  
35  
36 employment and to embark on a personal journey to broaden her learning horizons. This was  
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38 supported by her belief of wider recognition of higher education that could provide a stronger  
39  
40 platform for future employment.  
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46 Rather than progressing straight to NVQ level 3, Dave immediately considered embarking on a  
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48 Foundation degree. His reason to do this was simply because, 'I knew if I want to progress  
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50 seriously in any workplace then I need some higher level qualifications behind me.' Dave was  
51  
52 also looking to progress as quickly as possible and like Jo, was able to accredit his prior  
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54 experience in the Navy in order to do so. In other words, 'the college said because of my  
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3 experience they were happy to take me straight onto the Foundation degree'. Despite tensions in  
4  
5 academia around 'what counts as credentialised learning', it is argued that APL should be  
6  
7 recognised as a developmental tool (Houlbrook 2012). However, it was developmental only in  
8  
9 the sense of time saved. Accreditation for Dave was, 'good because that saved me sort of  
10  
11 another year or so's work'. On the one hand, APL was useful for progressing quickly and  
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13 moving on to more challenging learning opportunities. On the other hand, it restricted the  
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15 opportunities that might have been gained as part of the apprenticeship.  
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22 In keeping with Dave's commitment to his employer, consideration of further study centred on  
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24 how it would fit around his work:  
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27 the Foundation degree seemed to be win-win because I could fit it in around work  
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29 because they offered it as evening sessions, it was a very flexible option they offered  
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31 there, because you could do either an afternoon, evening, a full day or two evenings so it  
32  
33 was very flexible, so I could fit it in around work.  
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37 The importance of fitting around work continued after he completed the Foundation degree. The  
38  
39 lack of a part time pathway to progress to a Bachelor's degree meant that he later chose to  
40  
41 complete a level 7 Diploma in Strategic Management recognised by the Chartered Management  
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43 Institute.  
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48 Whilst Dave, like Amber, considered higher education to provide a strong platform for future  
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50 employment, he had to demonstrate different capabilities to sustain full time employment. In  
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52 order to progress Dave had to become adept at using whatever processes existed to meet the  
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3 demands of his employment, particularly in relation to time. This involved being successful at  
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5 APL as well as seeking out and pursuing flexible higher education courses.  
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10 By the time Jo completed her apprenticeship she was looking to change employment. Indeed, it  
11 was during her training at the construction company that Jo became interested in joining the  
12 training provider as an employee. As she explained, ‘I wanted a bit of a career change, this is  
13 only ten minutes down the road from where I used to work so it was quite convenient, so I went  
14 for the interview and got it and that was July nearly two years ago.’ As a result of moving to a  
15 new job, Jo taught for the training provider and as part of this, completed a certificate in teaching  
16 in lifelong learning sector (Ctlls), as well as a management course. Her successes appeared to  
17 perpetuate a wish to continue to accrue qualifications. As she later went on to say: ‘I think I’m a  
18 bit of a glory hunter. So if I’ve got – like if I can go look at me, look at me I’ve done something  
19 else, I don’t know, I think I just like to be better. It sounds really big headed.’ As before, this  
20 description emphasises her regard for formal learning as the accumulation of products.  
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39 In order to undertake a career change during the transition to higher education, Jo relied on her  
40 capability to network. This was made possible by her experiences of ‘boundary crossing’ as  
41 described by Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2003). Unlike Amber or Dave, Jo experienced a  
42 form of horizontal development involves crossing social and cultural borders between different  
43 activity systems during her apprenticeship. This is distinct from the vertical development of  
44 mastering a skill or a body of knowledge (Guile and Young 2003). These particular  
45 circumstances helped her build on the social links made during her apprenticeship to pursue her  
46 career and higher education simultaneously. This also meant that she was able to develop a  
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3 learning identity that fitted with her role as an educator of work-based learning. Interestingly,  
4 this learning identity did not seem at odds with the propositional learning lens (Hager and  
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Hodkinson 2009) that she used to describe gaining qualifications.

### PERCEIVED OUTCOMES

So far this paper has explored the learner's experiences of the apprenticeship and the transition to higher education. To fully understand how learning was understood, it was important to ascertain what learners considered they had gained from transition. The findings demonstrate not only the perceived impact of higher education and their hopes and expectations for the future, but what part, if any, learning would play in their future.

Amber described how progression to higher education contributed to her personal transformation. One way in which this manifested itself was a broader understanding and knowledge of her industry, signalling a change of mind about her future. When asked how the Foundation degree was benefitting her, she stated:

...I think doing the degree has opened me up to know there's so much more to hospitality than what I thought there was. Because, after being dead cert [sic] I was just going to run a restaurant actually and now I think maybe I should do sales for a while.

As this shows, Amber now wanted to spend more time exploring the different roles within her industry before deciding on one. Indeed, she went on to say that it was not until her Foundation degree that she had the opportunity to cross boundaries in a way that improved her confidence:

we've been to other hotels, restaurants, looked around and been on like visits and work-shadowing which is all part of the course and without doing the course I never would

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3 done that. I wouldn't have felt confident enough just to call a company and say, 'hiya,  
4 I'm a FD student, could I come and work-shadow for a day?' because it's just the fear of  
5 rejection isn't it?  
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12 However, her view of personal transformation was extended by regarding transition as a vehicle  
13 for future learning. This was highlighted when asked what she wanted to do next. She explained:

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15 I don't like being comfortable if that makes sense, I like pushing the boundaries and  
16 making sure that I'm still learning again. So obviously staying in the same place I'm not  
17 learning anything new. So I need to be moving around and learning new skills.  
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25 In other words, the experience she gained of higher education instilled in her an even deeper  
26 belief in 'pushing boundaries'. This suggests a view of learning as an ongoing process (Hager  
27 and Hodkinson 2009) and in this way, Amber epitomises the vision suggested by Säljö (2003,  
28 317), who wishes to focus on organising learning so that, 'students appreciate being in a position  
29 of acting as learners'.  
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39 In the case of Dave, completion of his Level 7 Diploma signalled a clear endpoint to that phase  
40 of his learning. He demonstrated this when he compared his progress to others who had chosen  
41 alternative routes:  
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45 ...it's been five years now so I think I've sort of caught up with myself academically. I  
46 was always mindful of the time in the Navy. I'd sort of dropped behind other people of  
47 my age and I think I've sort of caught up with that now...  
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53 From his response there appears to be a clear separation of academic learning and himself,  
54 similar to that of Jo when describing the benefits of qualifications to her CV. One explanation  
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3 for their understanding of learning in this way is the implicit messages contained within policy  
4 materials and public discourse about the importance of higher education (Wolf 2002). As it has  
5 been argued by Burke (2012), by providing different courses with particular aims (e.g. work-  
6 focused), the widening participation student is constituted as 'Other' which can lead to a strong  
7 sense of division and difference. At the same time, everyone is presented as having the  
8 opportunity to go to higher education so that if they do not attend, it can be claimed that it is  
9 because they choose not to (Ball 1990; Williams 1997). From this extract it appeared that Dave  
10 too was responding to this discourse by comparing his progress to 'other people of my age'.  
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24 For Dave the outcome of his transition to higher education related to what he could do at work.  
25 Indeed, he had adopted a certain loyalty to the company: 'the Council have put a lot in me over  
26 five years and I feel sort of indebted to them and want to return that.' If as Boden and Nedeva  
27 (2010) have noted, employability is now a performative function of universities, it is perhaps  
28 understandable that students pay so much attention to the transfer of learning to the workplace.  
29 This issue is increasingly addressed in government documentation about higher education. For  
30 example, as the recent HE white paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011c),  
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40         Graduates are more likely to be equipped with the skills that employers want if there is  
41         genuine collaboration between institutions and employers in the design and delivery of  
42         courses. (p.39)  
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48 There is an absence here too of any perception of learning as personal or ongoing. Rather it is  
49 about skills as independent of the learner and something that can simply be acquired and  
50 transferred on demand.  
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3 Jo, like Amber, was encouraged to consider undertaking more higher education qualifications  
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5 simply because she had proved to herself that she was capable:  
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8           that was the first time I've ever had to do research or anything and then writing and  
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10           Harvard referencing and all the rest of it. So now I've got that under my belt and  
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12           understand it, it wouldn't scare me to do any more higher education.  
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15 She later stated: 'I've got my Cert Ed as well that now gives me the opportunities to go to quite  
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17 a few different places.' In this way Jo was demonstrating her capability to use academic learning  
18  
19 to experience ongoing personal transformation and to continue broadening her learning horizons.  
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24 Despite earlier references to learning as acquisition, Jo did provide examples of ways in which  
25  
26 learning changed her behaviour. This is an important aspect of learning as becoming but can be  
27  
28 difficult to evidence. When asked to describe how she thought she had changed she said, 'my  
29  
30 own teaching improved...' However, she went on to provide a more specific example:  
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34           it took me a little while to get my head around the theories but then after a while the more  
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36           you start hearing them and the principles you actually start rolling them off without even  
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38           knowing...I didn't think I'd taken on much knowledge but the more you get asked, the  
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40           more you remember, so that was quite good as well.  
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43 This is what Hager and Hodkinson (2009) describe as embedding learning, although as they  
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45 point out, if this happens completely it can remain a mystery how individuals are reshaped.  
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50 Work by Engeström (2001) focuses on the impact that a changing context has on individual  
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52 learners but less on how individual learners can shape contexts. Jo was the only learner who  
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54 described how individual learning could influence the work place. As she explained,  
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3 our Powerpoints used to be really wordy, like ridiculously and every time I got an  
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5 observation this is what was said and after about a year it was taken on board.  
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8 In other words, the feedback she had received from her higher education course accredited by a  
9  
10 local university was passed on to her working environment. This example demonstrates how  
11  
12 learning is a process that cannot always be encapsulated by metaphors of acquisition or transfer  
13  
14 but as a relational web that can make very subtle but important differences to existing  
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16 communities of practice. This is also more in keeping with 'learning as becoming' because it  
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18 acknowledges how learning can shape different contexts (Hager and Hodkinson 2009).  
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20 Arguably, opportunities to examine both aspects of change are important to fully understand  
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22 learning transition.  
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## 28 29 **CONCLUSION**

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31 Whilst the sole aim of apprenticeships is not to lead to higher education, there is an increasing  
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33 expectation that apprentices should have the opportunity to do so (BIS 2010). Yet there has been  
34  
35 little attempt to understand how existing pathways have been experienced and outcomes  
36  
37 perceived. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring the transition from an  
38  
39 apprenticeship to higher education from the perspective of three individuals. The three case  
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41 studies presented here were selected according to distinct pathways for which each individual  
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43 demonstrated particular capabilities to navigate change. These capabilities were shaped by their  
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45 experiences of apprenticeship, the relationship to their employer and their understanding of  
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47 learning.  
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3 The process of learning during the apprenticeship was most commonly explained by learners in  
4 relation to NVQ qualifications with little reference to features of an expansive apprenticeship  
5 such as knowledge-based qualifications or participation in multiple communities of practice.  
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7  
8 Furthermore, evidence suggested that both Dave and Amber were pursuing apprenticeships that  
9 involved qualifications at a level that they had already completed, as found by Winterbotham and  
10 Godwin (BIS 2011b). This was especially true in relation to the NVQ level 2. The case studies  
11 therefore call into question, as for others (Young 2011; Brockmann et al. 2010), the adequacy of  
12 the NVQ for the apprenticeship framework and whether time and energy would be better spent  
13 'providing a sufficient platform for progression' as recommended by Fuller and Unwin (2012,  
14 41). Policy makers and employers must ensure that apprenticeship frameworks develop skills  
15 and knowledge over and above the levels of expertise already reached prior to starting the  
16 apprenticeship.  
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34 Each transition was shaped by a particular relationship to an employer which influenced the  
35 capabilities needed to negotiate the transition to higher education. In particular, the availability  
36 of part time higher education courses was essential for those needing to sustain full time  
37 employment. However, the recent changes in higher education such as the cap on numbers and  
38 rise in tuition fees in England now means that routes from vocational pathways and Foundation  
39 degrees are under threat (Milburn 2012).  
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51 The option to accredit prior learning was also a feature of transition for two of the case studies.  
52 Whilst Dave and Jo were able to progress through their apprenticeship quickly on account of the  
53 option to accredit their prior learning, APL might also encourage learners to employ a  
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3 propositional view of academic learning as well as limiting the opportunity for new and ‘deeper’  
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5 learning to occur. As the case of Jo illustrated, the risk is that important learning is missed which  
6  
7 can cause anxiety later. Arguably, taking a more developmental approach to APL is important if  
8  
9 learners are to get the most out of their learning opportunities (Houlbrook 2012).  
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14 As Hager and Hodkinson (2009, 621) stated, ‘to rely exclusively on one particular lens and its  
15  
16 associated metaphors for understanding learning is to limit understanding in advance’. The  
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18 experiences described here suggest that learners do not tend to view learning using a particular  
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20 lens. Indeed, how they understood learning was continually shaping and being shaped as they  
21  
22 navigated change. For example Jo was able to describe examples of individual change as well as  
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24 changes to work practices, but at times continued to discuss formal education using the  
25  
26 propositional lens. This in itself suggests that transition and learning should not be treated as  
27  
28 entailing an end point. These experiences are only part of these learners’ lifelong transitions. It  
29  
30 is likely that aspects of these capabilities were in place before their apprenticeship began. As  
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32 Hager and Hodkinson (2009, 633) argue, ‘the ways in which a person (re)constructs themselves  
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34 and that which they are taught are influenced by the person they had already become when a  
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36 course started’.  
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46 Notions of boundary crossing (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engestrom 2003) are particularly important if  
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48 we are to fully understand how, ‘...dispositions towards learning change over time and in  
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50 relation to changing circumstances in different life domains’ (Brockmann 2010, 64). This was  
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52 particularly pertinent for Jo, whose boundary crossing during her apprenticeship enabled her to  
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54 progress quickly in her career and Amber whose experiences of other areas of hospitality during  
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3 her Foundation degree improved her confidence and encouraged her to change her future plans.  
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5 From the findings it appears that this was key to the ways in which Jo and Amber were able to  
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7 articulate understandings of learning most closely associated to personal transformation  
8  
9 described by Hager and Hodkinson (2009).  
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15 In order to explore experiences of transition from an apprenticeship to higher education more  
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17 fully, longitudinal in depth data from a larger sample is needed. As Bloomer and Hodkinson  
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19 (2000) have argued, a longitudinal perspective of learning is important if we are to understand  
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21 learning development. Far too often, models of learning are based on notions of fixed personal  
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23 styles (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000) and as this paper highlights, personal styles can be  
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25 influenced by a range of factors shaped by both agency and structure.  
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31 At the very heart of this issue of progression lies an assumption from government that  
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33 encouraging apprentices to pursue higher education qualifications will aid social mobility and  
34  
35 help the economy. The three routes represented here show some of the perceived outcomes that  
36  
37 progression to higher education can provide. The detailed responses also highlight the potential  
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39 challenges of this particular group of learners, not only negotiating the different modes of study  
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41 and access to them, but the meanings that underpin their learning (Tobbell, et al. 2010). This  
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43 seems particularly pertinent for learners engaging in progression routes already acknowledged as  
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45 diverse and complex (Carter 2009).  
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Table1: Levels 3 to 7 qualifications

Level	FHEQ	QCF/NQF
3		BTEC Awards, Certificates, and Diplomas at level 3; BTEC Nationals; OCR Nationals; NVQs at level 3; A levels; GCE in applied subjects; International Baccalaureate; Key Skills level 3
4	Higher national certificates (HNC); Certificates of HE	BTEC Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Awards; HNCs; NVQs at level 4
5	Diplomas of higher education; Foundation degrees; Higher national diplomas	HNCs and HNDs; BTEC Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Awards; NVQs at level 5
6	Bachelor's degrees; Bachelor's degrees with honours; Graduate certificates and diplomas; Professional graduate certificate in Education	National diploma in professional production skills; BTEC advanced professional diplomas, certificates and awards; BTEC advanced professional diplomas, certificates and awards
7	Masters degrees; Integrated masters degrees; Postgraduate certificates; Postgraduate diplomas	Diploma in translation; BTEC advanced professional diplomas, certificates and awards; BTEC advanced professional diplomas, certificates and awards