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## "Is that normal?" What the Experiences of Apprentices Teach us about Practice and Policy

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**“Is that normal?” What the experiences  
of apprentices teach us about  
practice and policy**

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Thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Education (EdD)

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## ABSTRACT

This study exposes the absence of apprentice voice in debates about quality, and explains the implications from a theoretical position of learning as a social construct. The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a rapid growth in apprenticeships in England, with starts rising from 167,700 in 2002/3 to 375,800 in 2017/18. Ownership of the definition of apprenticeships is a contested matter with successive governments claiming that apprenticeships provide an alternative to university, and a cure for national skills shortages, social inequality and youth unemployment. Quality is conceived and measured using narrow economic- and employment-centred metrics. How apprentices conceive quality and success is largely unknown or ignored. I make the case that it is only by understanding the experiences and views of apprentices that we can start to make any headway into improving the quality of delivery.

I interviewed 33 apprentices to determine what it is like to 'do' an apprenticeship and to 'be' an apprentice. The ethnographic methodology used champions the apprentices' points-of-view, and allows me to discuss my findings in the context of theories about knowledge, identity, relationships, choice and power. The first apprentice that I interviewed wanted to know how her experiences compared with those of others, and the phrase, "Is that normal?" became a leitmotif for the study, exposing the myth of a normal apprentice, upon which, much current policy is based.

The original contribution of this thesis is to fill a gap in current knowledge, and provide a new apprentice-centred model to make sense of the apprentice experience. The thesis concludes with a challenge to those who create apprenticeship policy and deliver training, to develop a new and broader set of quality measures. I contend that adopting a more apprentice-centred approach will enhance the value of apprenticeships, and this has significant implications for employment and training.

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## Glossary of Terms

Academic	Associated with the study of knowledge, reasoning or theory.
Assessment Plan	A document that specifies how a particular apprenticeship standard will be assessed to ensure that an apprentice has demonstrated the required knowledge and skills
Behaviours	Personal attributes related to effective performance of a particular job such as teamwork, attention to detail or creativity.
Commitment statement	A mandatory document signed by the apprentice, employer and training provider at the start of an apprenticeship. It must include the planned content and schedule for training, what is expected and offered by each party, as well as how to resolve queries or complaints.
Competence	The ability of an individual to do a job properly, which may include knowledge, skills and behaviours. Individual competencies may describe the requirements of particular work tasks.
Conversion	Apprentices who are already employed when they start their apprenticeship and, therefore, convert from a normal employee to an apprentice. Often associated with 'deadweight'.
Credentialisation or Credentialism	The acquisition of credentials such as qualifications in order to compete with others, rather than because the qualification itself, or the learning within it, is needed. The consequence is that more people are overqualified for the jobs that they are employed to do.
Deadweight	The funding of training that adds little or no value; for example, where the government funds training that would be delivered anyway and paid for by employers, or funding training in an area where the individual is already competent.
Destination measures	Data on what happens to individuals following the completion of an apprenticeship
Framework (apprenticeship)	A document developed by a sector body that describes a particular apprenticeship; for example, Construction Engineering. It includes any requirements for that apprenticeship. All frameworks must comply with SASE. Frameworks are being replaced by apprenticeship standards
Off-the-job Training	<p>'training which— (a) is received for the purposes of the skill, trade or occupation to which the framework relates, and (b) is not on-the-job training;' (ASCL) 2009, Section 27 (4).</p> <p>Off-the-job training includes time at college, although it can include training in the workplace; for example, watching demonstrations, undertaking simulations and making samples or test pieces.</p>
On-the-job Training	'training received in the course of carrying on the skill, trade or occupation to which the (apprenticeship) framework relates.' (ASCL) 2009, Section 27 (4).

	On-the-job training includes copying experienced colleagues and practising skills. It is often referred to as training at the workbench.
Progression	What a learner does after completing a particular course of study. Measured by destination data
Sector	A group of industries engaged in similar work e.g. beauty or professional services. The sector may include related occupations or professions.
Skill	The ability to carry out a task to a particular standard. Skills include craft skills such as woodturning or welding, professional skills such as accounting or legal, and softer skills such as communicating with customers or prioritising workloads.
Standard (apprenticeship)	A document describing the outcomes of a particular apprenticeship in terms of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Standards are gradually replacing apprenticeship frameworks. Also used to describe a required level of competency.
Technical	See Vocational.
Trailblazers	Groups of employers who develop apprenticeship standards
Training	The process of facilitating the development of skills and knowledge that relate to specific competencies. Training often relates to improving capability, capacity, productivity and performance at work.
Training provider	An organisation whose main role is to deliver training e.g. an FE college, university or private training provider. To deliver apprenticeship training in England the organisation must be on the Register of Apprentice Training Providers (RoATP)
Vocational	Courses, qualifications or institutions often associated with study related to a particular occupation.

## Acronyms

ASCL	Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act, 2009.  <i>Main primary legislation for English and Welsh apprenticeships. Introduced the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England. ASCL was amended by the Deregulation Act, 2015 to introduce new apprenticeship standards.</i>
DBIS (BIS)	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
DfE	Department for Education
ESFA (formerly SFA)	Education and Skills Funding Agency
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
IfATE (formerly IfA)	Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education
NSoA	National Society of Apprentices
NUS	National Union of Students
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
RoATP	Register of Apprentice Training Providers
RoEPAO	Register of End-Point Assessment Organisations
SASE	Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England.  <i>A document containing the rules for apprenticeship frameworks.</i>
VE(T)	Vocational Education (and Training)
YAAN	Young Apprentice Ambassadors Network

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the context for a study investigating the experience of apprentices. The study was undertaken between 2015 and 2019, during a major reform of apprenticeships in England. It was particularly important to demonstrate the relationship between theory, practice and policy, because this work was carried out as part of a professional doctorate. Theorising and researching within a real-world context presented a number of challenges, in particular the challenge of balancing the roles of researcher and practitioner. I describe the current gap in knowledge about the experience of apprentices, and a possible mismatch between the rhetoric and reality of apprenticeships. I begin to explore key themes, including my realisation, firstly that apprenticeships are heterogeneous and difficult to define, and secondly that apprentice voice is largely absent within literature and policy. Finally, I set out the three research questions that underpin the research.

### **1.1 Impetus for the research**

Following concerns about the quality, funding and relevance of apprenticeship training (BBC, 2012; Wolf, 2011), the Coalition Government (2010-15) commissioned Doug Richard to undertake an independent review of apprenticeships in England. My study took place in the context of a programme of reform, implementing recommendations from the review (Richard, 2012, see Appendix A: Richard Review Recommendations). The government was under pressure to increase the quality and size of the apprenticeship programme in order to address national and local skills gaps.

For the last 20 years, I have worked on skills policy within government departments and non-departmental public bodies. Since its launch in 2017, I have worked for the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), where I manage the external quality assurance of apprenticeship assessment. I am particularly interested in the human side of apprenticeships. My ontological position is that the real value of the apprenticeship programme, the source of any learning, and the measure of quality, stems from the effectiveness of the relationships between the apprentice, employer and training provider, and the extent to which the partners within the apprenticeship share a common vision. I regularly deliver careers talks through a volunteer scheme, bringing me into contact with young people considering apprenticeships as an alternative to full-time education. Working with schools and colleges, I have witnessed a lack of knowledge about apprenticeships, including some persistent myths about what apprenticeships are and who should take them. I have also noted a potential mismatch between the rhetoric of the government in promoting apprenticeships as an alternative to university, some teachers who insist wrongly, that apprenticeships are only for less-academic young people, and the apprentices themselves, who span a wide range of ages and abilities.

Originally, I set out to conduct a study into the transition from full-time education to apprenticeship, because, for many apprentices, this is a critical point in their journey. As I reviewed the literature; however, I noticed a significant gap in research involving the experience of those undertaking an apprenticeship. I started to realise that the voice of the apprentice is seldom heard in debates about apprenticeships and when it is mentioned, it is rarely given much weight. I particularly felt the absence of the apprentice voice in policy

documents; for example, the Government's response to the Richard Review of Apprenticeships (DBIS, 2013), and in many of the metrics that are used by government to measure the quality of apprenticeships (Vivian et al., 2012). This discovery led me to change the focus of my research to the experience of apprentices, and how evidence about that experience could change the way that the quality of apprenticeships is considered, measured and discussed. I wanted to understand what it was like to be an apprentice in the 2010s. I was also curious about why the views of these important stakeholders had been largely ignored. Potential explanations included a lack of time, or interest, and concerns that what we might hear would be difficult to explain or to implement. I hoped to show that, not only is it possible to capture the apprentice voice, but that using insights from apprentices could improve both policy and practice and ultimately, raise the quality of apprenticeships. The three main problems that I noted were the difficulties of defining apprenticeships and their purpose, flaws in understanding and measuring quality, and the absence of the apprentice voice.

## **1.2 Difficulties of defining apprenticeships and their purpose**

Apprenticeships are one of the oldest forms of formal vocational learning, dating back to the crafts guilds of the medieval period. They have always involved a relationship between an experienced person and a novice for the purpose of learning a craft or trade. The relationship between apprentice and 'master' is just as important today. However, today's apprentice may work for multiple managers, and learning may come from interactions with managers, colleagues and trainers. The apprenticeship programme has expanded into new occupations that have no tradition of apprenticeships, and a third party, the training

provider, has been introduced into the relationship, affecting traditional roles and the balance of power (Raven, 2008). Changes to the way that work is organised may mean that the apprentice is the 'expert' within their organisation; for example, a digital marketing apprentice may be the only employee focusing on digital marketing and will need to think about, and negotiate the application of what she learns in college to her workplace, in order to support the business. A better understanding of apprentices is essential to developing a platform for improving those relationships, and subsequently the quality of apprenticeships. It is also important to ensure that concepts such as agency, power and identity are adequately theorised, in order to explain the complexities of the relationships.

Apprenticeship is not a fixed concept, it operates in a global and dynamic real-world context. One of the difficulties in defining the term 'apprenticeship' is that the concept continues to evolve, as noted in a recent comparison of apprenticeships across Europe (Cedefop, 2018, p. 18). Frequent changes to rules, regulations, and practice since 2000, and changes to the way that policy makers describe apprenticeships have made it difficult to identify the main purpose of an apprenticeship (Hawkins, 2008). The result is that the requirements and purpose of an apprenticeship may not be well understood by everyone who funds, employs, manages, trains, or is, an apprentice (Richards, 2012). Although there is no official definition of an apprenticeship in England, the government has set statutory criteria that provide some help. Apprentices in England must be paid employees and must receive a substantial programme of vocational training (Great Britain, *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009*). The Enterprise Act introduced legislation to protect the term 'apprenticeship', so now it can only be used for programmes approved by the



Government (DBIS, 2016b). In effect, the government has operationalised its power, because an apprenticeship is whatever the Government of the day says that it is.

Apprenticeships have provided opportunities for political point scoring and the three main political parties in England have each claimed responsibility for the growth in the number of apprentices since the start of the century (Conservative Party, 2015; Liberal Democrats, 2015; Husbands, 2014). Successive governments have wanted to make a mark, leading to numerous policy changes, impacting the content, delivery and growth of the programme. There is little doubt that State involvement in vocational education and training in England has increased over the years, as a result of shifts in political priorities and pedagogical beliefs. Apprenticeships, it seems, have multiple purposes from filling national skills gaps, meeting the needs of individual employers, providing an alternative to university and reducing youth unemployment. A clear trend has been a shift of power from bodies representing occupational sectors, which had devised apprenticeship content, based on National Occupational Standards, to certain employers and the government, which now regulate, prescribe, define and fund the programme (Fuller and Unwin, 2015; Wolf, 2011). Apprenticeship is increasingly positioned as an economic policy, and a new apprenticeship levy to fund the cost of apprenticeship training came into effect in April 2017 for all employers that have an annual pay bill in excess of £3 million. The stated policy objectives for the levy are: boosting productivity, increasing the quantity and quality of apprenticeships, putting 'employers at the centre of the system', and allowing employers to 'get back more than they put in' (HMRC, 2016). It is telling that there is no specific mention of improving opportunities for apprentices. The government has chosen to put employers

at the centre of the system, and the Richard Review demonstrates a sort of Foucauldian approach to the operation of power, prioritising dominant stakeholders, whilst normalising and constraining possibilities (Foucault, 1991, pp. 210–222).

Despite the government’s attempts to constrain the programme, pressure to solve multiple policy challenges such as youth unemployment, skills gaps, and the need for a vocational alternative to academic learning, means that the heterogeneity of apprenticeship continues. In England, an apprenticeship can be taken by anyone over 16 years of age in any of the 479 occupations currently available (IfA, 2019). The programme spans a wide range of qualification ‘levels’ (Appendix B: Qualification Levels), and the training can be delivered in a range of institutional settings, including private training providers, colleges, universities, or wholly in the workplace. Of the 375,800 people who started an apprenticeship in the 2017/18 academic year; 28 per cent were aged 16-18, 30 per cent were 19-24 and 41 per cent were 25 or over (DfE, 2019).

### **1.3 Flaws in understanding and measuring quality**

With no clear definition or single purpose, it is difficult to understand and measure the quality of apprenticeships. The current reform focuses on increasing employer engagement and quality from the employer’s perspective (DBIS, 2013). Employer engagement here means the proportion of employers who are aware of, and understand apprenticeships, and who employ apprentices (Richard, 2012, pp. 19, 124-5). By quality, Richard meant that apprenticeships should meet the needs and expectations of employers in terms of the programme content, in particular the relevance to the job, and the way that the apprentice

is assessed. Richard's view was that the best way to achieve this is for employers to be involved in setting apprenticeship standards, defining content, and funding the training (Richard, 2012, p. 128). When the Government originally announced that it had commissioned Doug Richard to carry out a review of apprenticeships, the stated aims of the review were to:

*Look at how to build upon the record of success of recent years by:*

- *Ensuring that apprenticeships meet the needs of the changing economy*
- *Ensuring every apprenticeship delivers high quality training and the qualifications and skills that employers need*
- *Maximising the impact of Government investment.*

DBIS, 2012b

It is apparent, therefore, that when Richard was asked to determine 'what the core components of a high quality apprenticeship should be' (DBIS, 2012b), the focus was always to be on quality from the perspective of business and the economy, and the Secretary of State for Education at that time, Michael Gove, stated that Richard was chosen because he was a 'proper entrepreneur' (DBIS, 2012b). Richard makes few references to the views of apprentices within his report and pays little attention to other possible measures of quality, such as the satisfaction of participants, or independently observed activity.

The frequent use of the term 'employer engagement' within the Richard Review (Richard, 2012) compounds the message that, for government, the main 'customers' for apprenticeships are employers and not the apprentices or society as a whole. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy and employer funding contributions were intended to encourage or force employers to offer apprenticeships, using a market approach to raise the quality of apprenticeships. However, the focus on quantitative and economic measures

of success suggests that, to date, policy makers have largely seen apprentices in utilitarian terms, as units of labour productivity (Avis and Atkins, 2017, p. 175). Theorising this from a social perspective, the focus on employers and economic measures devalues individual apprentices, completely ignoring the apprentice as a stakeholder. Richard positions some changes that may benefit apprentices themselves, as secondary to the benefits to businesses:

*Government, through NAS [the National Apprenticeship Service] and other employer networks and engagement, should increase the levels of mentoring, coaching and brokerage support that exist to help smaller employers with less capacity to take on an apprentice.*

Richard, 2012, p. 130

Richard's comments further emphasise a shift from the old master-apprentice relationship with the introduction of new networks and partners. It could be argued that a reliance on narrow quality metrics damages the quality of apprenticeships (Segal, 2014, p. 1), and the introduction of the levy and various regulatory frameworks, leaves employers experiencing a reduction in real power and choice. The narrow view of quality also has serious implications for the identity and agency of apprentices, and the extent to which they feel that their needs are valued.

#### **1.4 Absence of apprentice voice**

Apprenticeship reforms have usually involved extensive consultation with employers, but limited attention to the views of apprentices (DBIS, 2013). The Richard Review proposed new, independent end-point assessments and a new system for funding apprenticeships (DfE, 2018a). The purposes of these measures are described in terms of their benefits for

employers; for example, ensuring ‘buy-in among employers’, being ‘respected by industry’ and giving employers ‘purchasing power’ (Richard, 2012, pp. 17-19).

A series of research reports, the Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Surveys, was first published in 2012. This research was commissioned by the Government, but despite the title, and the fact that Employer Surveys are run in parallel, the Apprenticeship Learner Surveys have focused on the benefits of apprenticeships to business and to national productivity targets (Colaghan and Johnson, 2014; Tu et al., 2013). The surveys also provide very little evidence about the experience of being an apprentice. Government marketing campaigns such as ‘Get in. Go far’ (DBIS, 2016a; 2014b), reference the quality experience and transformational effects of apprenticeships for the individual, but very little is known about the experiences of the apprentices themselves. This lack of evidence and absence of apprentice voice in debates about apprenticeship quality, together demonstrate the gap in research that I wanted to address. I wanted to explore any evidence that is available and to generate new data about the experiences, views and needs of apprentices.

### **1.5 The research questions**

The study investigates what apprentices consider a successful apprenticeship, and specific factors that support or hinder success. The study also explores the relationships between the social partners involved in the apprenticeship, and the impact that this has on the experience, including the extent to which employers and training providers have the desire and capacity to have a greater role in supporting their apprentices. The research questions went through a number of iterations, and the final set were:

RQ1: How do 16-24-year-old apprentices describe their experience of apprenticeship?

RQ2: What factors do apprentices consider support or hinder the quality and success of an apprenticeship?

RQ3: What significance does the relationship between the apprentice, employer and training provider have on the apprentices' experience?

This chapter set the scene for the research, explaining the context of the research and three key themes: the difficulties in defining apprenticeships; flaws in understanding quality; and the absence of apprentice voice. From an ontological position of learning as a social construct, I planned to collect evidence in order to determine whether considering the apprentices' perspectives might lead to improvements in the quality of apprenticeships. In the next chapter I undertake a critical review of the relevant literature to capture what is already known and to help shape my own study.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter describes the systematic search of relevant literature that I undertook in order to discover relevant work and familiarise myself with key theories, texts and authors. The experience of apprentices is under-researched, so it was necessary to integrate literature from a number of previously unrelated areas within the fields of education, work-based training, employment, economics, politics, and sociology, in order to plan my research and develop my own theory. Using research from such a broad range of academic disciplines was challenging, but it exposed different perspectives and gaps in understanding. I was able to build on some of the literature, explaining its relevance to my study. Other literature is used to highlight shortcomings in theory, evidence and practice. The chapter begins with an explanation of how I organised my literature search, including new lines of inquiry resulting from the gaps and connections that were discovered. The remainder of the chapter is arranged thematically with each section exploring literature on a key theme of particular relevance to my research. Finally, I explain how a critical analysis of the literature helped to define the scope of my research and in particular the development of my research questions.

### **2.1 Literature search**

Initially I had planned to research the transition from school to apprenticeship. However, I quickly became aware of a lack of literature on the experiences of apprentices and in particular I felt the absence of the apprentice voice in any discussion of the quality of apprenticeships. This led to a shift in the focus of my research towards the experience of those undertaking an apprenticeship, support for apprentices more generally, and to

notions of success and quality within apprenticeships. As I investigated the apprentice voice as a theme, I began to see how it could influence my own thinking and research position, causing me to focus more on social justice and the importance of relationships. As a result, I sought additional literature on research methodology that would champion the voice of participants.

I devised a search strategy to define and limit the parameters of my literature search, in order to keep the project focused and manageable. Appendix C: Literature Search Terms contains a list of key terms used for my literature search and a list of the topics that I eventually excluded from my lines of inquiry. Several times I felt that my literature review began to get too large and unfocused as I pursued interesting theories. I frequently revisited my list of terms, making small adjustments to admit relevant new lines of enquiry and close down any that were leading me off focus. Several of the topics that I excluded from the literature search are still mentioned where relevant within the literature review, but they were not a focus for the research. One such example is evidence of an under-representation of those with Asian and black ethnicities and of gender bias within apprenticeships. This lack of inclusivity relates to gender and racial stereotypes and identities (Newton and Williams, 2013, p. 11). Young people, their parents, teachers and employers may hold deep-seated beliefs about who should be an apprentice, and in which job (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997; Banks et al., 1992; Ashton and Field, 1976). Although links between social inequality and opportunity within apprenticeships are very important, I chose not to focus on them within my study. This is because of the need to limit the scope in order to keep the research manageable, and secondly, because authors including Newton



and Williams' (2013) work on race and gender, and Fuller et al.'s (2015) work on older learners have made significant contributions to our understanding of social inequality within apprenticeships, leaving less of a gap within the literature. The fact that there is an interest in exploring how apprenticeships can better support minority or disadvantaged groups reinforces my claims about the complexity of apprenticeship policy and practice.

Although excluded from the focus of my study, a particularly interesting debate at the time of writing concerns the impact that the introduction of degree apprenticeships will have. This was excluded from my study, because it is too early to tell whether degree apprenticeships will improve access to professions for under-represented groups such as those with disabilities or those from deprived backgrounds, or simply channel funds to learners who are already advantaged by the social structure and education system (Anderson, 2017; Crawford-Lee, 2017).

I decided to include the views of individual ministers within the literature review, because I felt that this was relevant to the relationship between theory, policy and practice, critical for a professional doctorate. The debate served to highlight the contested ground of defining apprenticeship, the politicisation of policy, assumptions about apprentices and the use of power and influence.

Throughout the study, undertaken between 2014 and 2019, I used my list of terms to run monthly searches for articles and other literature using the Open University's on-line library. The library's on-line search function provided access to multiple databases, including

Academic Search Complete, ABELL, British Education Index, CORE, Education Research Complete, Education Research Abstracts, Emerald, EThOS, Hansard, JSTOR, and the Wiley Online Library. University librarians also helped me to undertake systematic searches of journals, books and other materials. I identified a number of journals with a particular focus on vocational education, such as the *Journal of Vocational Education & Training; Education + Training; and the International Journal for Research in Education and Training*. I supplemented the Open University library with additional research databases such as Google Scholar and ERIC. In addition, I registered with, or viewed a number of websites that allowed me to engage in academic discussion, follow particular authors and receive notifications whenever new research was published, such as Researchgate, Academia and Oxford Academic. I also searched government document management systems and archives for any relevant 'grey literature' including unpublished and non-commercial materials such as speeches, reports, internal documents and correspondence. As my research progressed, I attended conferences and events with a focus on apprenticeships or vocational education, and engaged with a number of academics and practitioners, some of whom shared their ideas about my work and recommended particular lines of inquiry, authors or articles.

## **2.2 Reviewing the literature**

I used a version of the Cornell technique to organise my notes on each text that I read, adapting a template slightly to suit my needs (Donohoo, 2010). This simple technique helped me to critically review literature, identifying the main topics and ideas and condensing each text into a single page summary. Using this system helped me to identify

gaps and connections in the diverse literature that I was working with. An example of my summary of one text is included as Appendix D: Example of Research Diary Entry. I then transferred my notes on any key texts that I identified to Mendeley. Mendeley is an electronic system that can be used to organise academic references and to store any notes about them, alongside the text itself, if it is available as HTML or pdf. The tool makes it easy to export the references for whole collections, following academic referencing conventions and styles. I exported the list that I created in Mendeley using a version of the Harvard style, to provide the basis for the reference section of this thesis.

I found that literature on the quality of apprenticeships is predicated on the way that the author, or body that commissioned the research, perceives the purpose of the apprenticeship. As a result, I found that quality tends to be conceived, described and measured in terms of: international success, including comparisons between policy and practice in different countries; economic success, including addressing national skills shortages and targets; pedagogical success, including the quality of education and training; or social success, including social mobility and the ‘transformation’ of the apprentice (Newton et al., 2019, pp. 41-49). Understanding the behaviour and views of those involved in the policy and delivery of apprenticeships is important to this study, because it helps to provide the clearest explanation of where apprenticeships are situated within educational policy and practice. This provides a foundation upon which I can consider a more theoretical literature, drawn from a range of academic disciplines to address the particular concerns of my study.

Current literature on learner identity and voice is then analysed in detail, demonstrating the impact of efforts to capture learner voice in higher and further education. I include criticism about the way that learner voice is used for certain purposes. I identify specific gaps in knowledge and understanding about the apprentice voice, and the significance of these gaps. In addition, the literature review was the starting point for my decisions about research methodology and was an important stage in developing my research framework. The final part of the chapter explains how the literature helped to define the scope of my research and in particular how it shaped the focus of the initial research questions.

### **2.3 Defining apprenticeships**

One of the challenges when thinking about the quality of apprenticeships is that there is no single definition of the programme or its purpose. Understanding the literature helps to make sense of a programme that can be conceived of and judged in a number of ways. Exploring literature on the politicisation of apprenticeships can help to explain the impact of policy priorities on the way the programme is conceived and delivered. Much of the literature here is from grey literature, rather than academic publications. I accessed speeches, announcements, transcripts from committee meetings, policy documents and papers from government departments and a number of other bodies, including charities and organisations representing employers and other stakeholders. Of particular interest, were the quite distinctive views expressed by successive skills ministers about apprentices and the purpose of apprenticeships in policy terms.

When she was appointed skills minister in June 2017, Anne Milton became the fifth person to hold the post in eight years. She focused on apprenticeships as the antidote to problems with workforce strategy, when she suggested that employers fall into either the category of those who have ‘drunk the magic elixir of apprenticeships’, or those who have not yet discovered the benefits of the programme (IfA, 2018d). The programme’s purpose has been described more prosaically, as a means of addressing national skills shortages by preparing people for specific occupations (Cedefop, 2018; Billett, 2016a). In contrast, Matthew Hancock’s speeches from his time as minister for apprenticeships, between September 2012 and July 2014, are peppered with references to economic measures, including the value of apprenticeships in supporting future economic growth, return on investment, employer choice and global competition (Hancock, 2014).

Apprenticeships have also been described as a way to occupy and ‘better’ young people who would otherwise be at risk of being classified as NEET (not in employment, education or training), particularly in response to the youth riots during the Summer of 2011 (Morrell et al., 2011, p. 37 ;Woods, 2011). Nick Boles, in office between July 2014 and July 2016, emphasised the potential of the programme to improve diversity, social mobility and opportunity for individuals (HC Deb 10 March 2016, c. 452), and Robert Halfon, in post between July 2016 and June 2017, built on his predecessor’s idea of transformation and betterment. Halfon used the image of a ‘ladder of opportunity’ to emphasise the apprenticeship as a vehicle for social mobility and to highlight the need for good careers advice in helping young people to make sound choices in order to better themselves (Halfon, 2017). These views present a deficit model of apprentices, suggesting that young

people are problems that may be overcome with some minimal support (Avis and Atkins, 2017, p. 175).

John Hayes, who had responsibility for the programme between May 2010 and September 2012 focused on the intrinsic value of learning within apprenticeships. He described his vision for apprenticeships as a reinvention of the arts and crafts movement; a sentimental and nostalgic nod to the period from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century when traditional craftsmanship came back into fashion. Hayes also referenced even earlier apprenticeships, going back to the crafts guilds of the medieval era (Hayes, 2010). I could argue that these changes in emphasis and use of vivid imagery are simply reflections of the interests and priorities of individual ministers; however, when seen together, they illustrate how apprenticeships can be conceptualised in a range of ways, for a range of purposes and that these purposes are not mutually exclusive. It is possible for an apprenticeship to benefit the employer, the nation and the individual apprentice at the same time, but the sum of those benefits is unlikely to be equally apportioned between the three, because of differences in power. Control of the narrative on apprenticeships is a form of legitimate and political power (Raven, 2008), and the way that apprenticeships are defined impacts the way that quality is conceived and measured.

#### **i. Defining apprenticeship: An international policy perspective**

Although my study was limited to England, it was necessary to include international comparisons, because politicians and policy makers use these comparisons to draw particular conclusions. Comparing the demography of English apprentices with global

counterparts also helps to put the differences in policy and practice into context. Literature critiquing the apprenticeship programme in England often does so through references to global competitiveness, and direct comparisons with apprenticeship schemes in other parts of the world. It is important to exercise caution, however, because international comparisons inevitably lead to claims about the superiority of one system over another; for example, critics of the English system often point to the quality and success of the dual system in countries such as Germany and Switzerland (Select Committee on Social Mobility, April 2016, p. 50). Within the dual system apprenticeships are integrated within the national education system and training is delivered jointly between specialist colleges and workplaces. However, it is never a simple matter of one system being better than another; for example, Dolphin (2014, p. 21) provides a critical appraisal of the dual system stating that young people in Germany who fail to secure an apprenticeship are worse off than those in other countries. Other literature suggests that German students are poorly informed and unprepared for apprenticeships, with nearly one quarter of German apprentices breaking their contracts and companies left struggling to fill vacancies (Damaschke, 2013).

Although international comparisons explain the relative strengths of different apprenticeship systems, the unique circumstances in each country, such as the education system, dependence on the State, the involvement of trades unions or chambers of commerce, or the strength of local or social partnerships, may prevent the transfer of advantages of one system to another country (Dolphin, 2014, pp. 30-31). Hamilton asserts that the German model could solve the problem of adolescents 'floundering' in the USA (Hamilton, 1987, pp. 315, 340), but makes no attempt to explain how a German model could

be applied in the US given the very different education and governance systems operating in the two countries, in particular with the very different attitudes to state involvement. Similarly, it is unlikely that England could simply adopt a German apprenticeship model, because of differences in economic, structural and cultural systems (Wolf, 2011, pp. 25-29).

Although increasingly out of date, one of the most comprehensive international studies of apprenticeships is Hilary Steedman’s comparison of apprenticeships in seven countries, published in 2010. In this study, Steedman gathered similar data from each country and used it to describe each country’s approach to apprenticeships. I have collated key data from Steedman’s report to facilitate direct comparisons (Table 1).

	Australia	Austria	England	France	Germany	Ireland	Switzerland
<b>Apprentices per 1000 employed persons</b>	39	33	11	17	40	11	43
<b>Proportion of all apprentices aged 25+</b>	42%	0	25%	0	0	n/a	0
<b>No of apprentice occupations</b>	n/a	250	190	n/a	348	26	250
<b>Completion rates</b>	60%	85%	72%	79%	75-80%	67%	79%
<b>Proportion of all employers offering apprenticeships</b>	30%	n/a	8-13%	n/a	24%	5-11%	18%
<b>Duration</b>	3-4 years	2-4 years	9 months-2 years+	1-2 years	2-3 years	4 years	3-4 years
<b>Ave apprentice pay in 2009/10 (where UK=100)</b>	n/a	55	100	36	73	n/a	36

Table 1: Summary of the international comparison (Based on Steedman, 2010, pp. 5-35)



In most of the world apprenticeships are predominantly taken by young men, with young women tending to follow academic routes or leave formal education. In England; however, women account for approximately 50 per cent of apprentices (Steedman, 2010). More detailed data show the gendered nature of apprenticeships in England; for example, in 2012/13 three per cent of engineering apprenticeship starts and 92 per cent of childcare starts were female (DBIS, 2014a). Although these figures reflect those of the occupations in general, the difference in career choice for young men and young women is stark.

Many people also assume that apprenticeships are for young people and government marketing campaigns such as 'Get in. Go far' support this impression (DBIS, 2016a; and 2014b). In fact, just 22 per cent of new apprentices in England are 16-18 years old and 42 per cent are 25 or older (DBIS, 2014a). The number of older apprentices increased significantly since Steedman's report just four years earlier when the number of apprentices aged 25 or over was 25 per cent (Steedman, 2010). Funding for apprentices aged 25+ was trialled from 2005 to support businesses that typically employ older workers such as adult care and the school workforce. The main source of funding for other types of training for adults, Train to Gain, was withdrawn in 2009. This led to a rapid growth in older apprentices from 250 starts in 2006/7 to 210,000 in 2014/15. (DBIS, 2015b; Williams et al., 2013, p. 8). Although, on the surface this appears to create new employment opportunities for older learners, in reality up to two-thirds of apprentices are already employed when they start their apprenticeship (BEIS, 2017, p. 17; Fuller et al., 2017, p. 5). This is particularly evident in sectors that have introduced mandatory training requirements such as child care and adult care (Newton and Williams, 2013).

An apprenticeship can be beneficial to ‘conversions’, existing staff taking on a new role or additional responsibility at work, but often the apprenticeship is seen as ‘deadweight’ (Fuller et al., 2017, pp. 10; Richard, 2012, p. 53). Deadweight is the use of government funding to pay for training that is not needed or would otherwise be the responsibility of someone else, usually the individual learner or the employer. In the case of conversions, individuals may take qualifications simply to acquire certificates or credentials as evidence of what the learner already knows or can do, rather than new learning. The term is linked to the idea of credentialisation where the growing demand for credentials is also associated with the use of qualifications as a proxy for knowledge. Many jobs now list a degree as an entry requirement even though the job itself is classed as below degree-level (Ainley and Allen, 2010, p. 54; Eraut, 2002, pp. 66-68; Moore and Trenwith, 1997, p. 61). England is different to most other European countries where people tend to enter apprenticeships directly after school. From Table 1 we can see that Australia also has a high proportion of older apprentices, with 42 per cent being 25 or older. Existing literature can aid an understanding of the demography of apprentices and help to build a picture of who apprentices are and the range of experiences that they might have.

Steedman’s report is as interesting for what it does not say, as for what it does. Table 1 highlights many gaps in the data that Steedman was able to collect, suggesting that there are different interpretations within each country about what information is important and should be collected. The implication is that different countries have different ideas of what quality means in the context of apprenticeships, and subsequently measure quality in

different ways; for example, Steedman was unable to determine the proportion of employers that offered apprenticeships in Austria or France, the average apprentice pay in Australia or Ireland, or the number of occupations for which an apprenticeship was available in Australia or France. Steedman's review suggests, therefore, that we do not have any agreed way to measure the quality of apprenticeships internationally, or indeed any consensus about what constitutes quality. Steedman's report highlights the problematic nature of 'quality' as far as apprenticeships are concerned.

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training reviewed apprenticeship schemes across Europe. The subsequent report recognised the growing strategic importance of apprenticeships to fill national skills gaps, and recommended the development of a framework of EU-wide principles and quality standards (Cedefop, 2018, pp. 4-5). The review identified apprenticeship schemes in 24 of the 30 countries included, but found inconsistency in how apprenticeships are described and their purposes are defined, between and even within countries. The report was able to distinguish between three main types of apprenticeship: where apprenticeships function as part of an education and training system, where apprenticeships operate as a type of VET delivery within the formal VET system, and hybrid systems. There was, however, huge variation within each group and the heterogeneity of apprenticeship schemes is a key theme throughout the report (Cedefop, 2018, p. 12). The report defined the main challenges faced by all countries in the design of apprenticeships and I have summarised them as a series of continua in **Error! Reference source not found..**




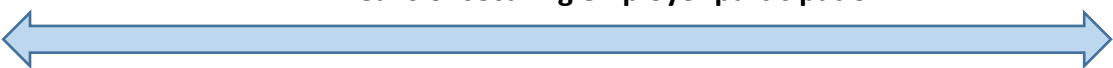
<b>1. Proximity to existing systems</b>		
		
<b>Education System</b>	<i>Impacts on the status of apprenticeships and the potential to transition between apprenticeships and education or other programmes</i>	<b>Training System</b>
<b>2. Choice of governance</b>		
		
<b>Highly Regulated</b>	<i>Impacts on the balance between government and employer control and the status of apprentices within the labour market</i>	<b>Non-Regulated</b>
<b>3. Control of training content and learning outcomes</b>		
		
<b>Training practitioner-defined</b>	<i>Impacts relevance and quality of training and the potential to transition between apprenticeships and education or other programmes, or to employment</i>	<b>Employer-defined</b>
<b>4. Means of securing employer participation</b>		
		
<b>Committed Employers</b>	<i>Dependent on motivation of employers and economic case for apprenticeships</i>	<b>Use of incentives</b>

Table 2: The four continua of critical choices for designing a national apprenticeship (based on Cedefop, 2018, p. 18)

The table demonstrates some of the key choices that policy makers need to consider when designing or redesigning an apprenticeship system, but it does not recognise the reality that choice will usually be constrained by customs, expectations and existing structures. The English apprenticeship programme is closer to training than dual systems in countries such as Germany and Switzerland, and its status is seen as lower than academic programmes (Select Committee on Social Mobility, April 2016, p. 50). The English system is lightly regulated when compared to the German system, because the government has chosen to

prioritise the economy and cede limited control to employers (Roberts, 2019, p. 24).

Following the Richard Review, employers have been given increased control of training content and assessment, though not all employers have been able to influence the design of the programme with small businesses having particular difficulties (Newton et al., 2019, p. 15). Finally, the government has had to rely on incentives such as the levy to secure employer participation (HMRC, 2016).

Apprenticeships in the USA have traditionally developed in a piecemeal fashion and are often company-specific; however, in June 2017 President Trump announced an Executive Order calling for a major expansion of apprenticeships (Whitehouse, 2017). A new Taskforce on Apprenticeship Expansion reported its recommendations the following year, but its report has been criticised for a lack of detail, particularly around implementation and ensuring quality (Gewertz, 2018). It is clear that the country's appetite for regulation and employers' and parents' enthusiasm for a national scheme had been overestimated, leaving limited choice for the US in any of the four fields in **Error! Reference source not found..**

Constraints also affected the implementation of the recommendations from the Richard Review of apprenticeships in England (DBIS, 2013), resulting in a range of statutory regulations, mandatory rules and detailed guidance. Having such rules could be interpreted as a rational approach by the bureaucratic state, to apply an element of discipline to the chaos of apprenticeships (Foucault, 1991; O'Neill, 1986, p. 42; Weber, 1978, p. 997).

Despite the existence of rules and regulations, the structure of apprenticeships in England still varies considerably. This suggests that the balance between a desire for quality and the

promise of flexibility for customers has not yet been achieved, and the domain of apprenticeships remains disorderly. Alison Wolf's Review of Vocational Education provided a comprehensive critique of vocational education in England, including apprenticeships. Wolf highlighted a number of features of policy and institutional practice that suggest that the messiness of apprenticeships is enshrined:

*...because a complex modern economy has a correspondingly complex occupational structure, central attempts to impose a neat, uniform and 'logical' structure on it always fail.*

Wolf, 2011, p. 57

Wolf set out the problems associated with this complexity in terms of inappropriate delegation of policy decisions, unclear lines of responsibility, the cost of having multiple bodies within the system, a lack of transparency, and a lack of responsiveness to the various stakeholders (Wolf, 2011, p. 65). It is my contention, therefore, that the lack of a clear definition of apprenticeships or a shared understanding of their purpose continues to act as the main barrier to meaningful improvements to quality.

## **ii. Apprenticeship as an economic policy**

Much of the literature on apprenticeships positions the programme as an economic policy by emphasising the purpose of the programme as addressing national skills shortages and the needs of employers. Defining apprenticeships in this way affects how quality is perceived and measured and emphasises the importance of employers above other stakeholders. In particular, contrasting discourses conceptualise apprentices as either resources using a utilitarian model, or problems using a deficit model. This affects how apprentices are seen by others and how they see themselves. Either discourse points to

issues with apprentices as individuals, rather than problems with the system in which they find themselves (Avis and Atkins, 2017, pp. 175-176). This has an impact on the relationships and balance of power between State, employer, training provider and apprentice. Over the last five decades a consistent theme in vocational education has been the need for greater employer engagement (Callaghan, 1976). Government's most recent response to the issue was the review of apprenticeships led by Doug Richard. A summary of the recommendations from the Richard Review of Apprenticeships can be found at Appendix A: Richard Review Recommendations. Underlying Richard's recommendations was an assumption that employers want, and should have, more responsibility for the design and delivery of apprenticeships:

*Individual employers, employer partnerships or other organisations with the relevant expertise should be invited to design and develop apprenticeship qualifications for their sectors.*

Richard, 2012, p. 17

It is important for employers to define the knowledge and skills that apprentices need, in order to ensure that the programme content aligns to the jobs that the apprentices will do. It is less clear, however, that employers have the capacity, expertise or desire to take the lead on developing qualifications or assessments. Chankseliani and James Relly (2015, pp. 515-516) have questioned Richards' recommendations about the role of employers, arguing that employers are not yet ready to lead the delivery of apprenticeships and that the system will continue to rely on private training providers. Many groups of employers (known as 'Trailblazers') commission other individuals or organisations to draft apprenticeship standards on their behalf; for example, an awarding body with expertise in education and

training within the occupational area, has supported the development of the apprenticeship standard for a butcher (IfA, 2017b).

The majority of employers have not been convinced to employ apprentices. Steedman's data in Table 1: Summary of the international comparison show that with 11 apprentices per 1,000 employed people, England has fewer apprentices than any other country investigated except Ireland. This is at least in part the result of the shift away from apprenticeships from the late 1970s to the 1990s when faster and cheaper alternatives such as the Youth Opportunity Programme, introduced in 1978, and its successor, the Youth Training Scheme, introduced in 1983, were sought to tackle the problem of youth unemployment and unrest in England (Cantor, 1989, p. 125). Keep and James argue that, despite a lack of employer engagement, apprenticeships remain attractive as a policy and a means of filling skills gaps (Keep and James 2011, pp. 55-56). Although various details of the programme, such as changes to funding, have come under criticism, even the harshest critics see the overall value of the programme (Allen, 2016). The popularity of the programme amongst politicians from all the main parties is evidenced by efforts to expand the number of apprentices in England since the early years of this century. The Conservative Party manifesto (2015) included a commitment to 3 million apprenticeship starts/registrations during the current parliament, which ends in 2020. Some critics argue that the focus on numerical targets including the expansion of apprenticeship numbers has been at the expense of quality (Fuller et al., 2017, p.5). Amim Smith et al. (2017) and Segal (2014) both highlight the need to ensure that a number of different measures are used to



assess quality, arguing that expanding apprentice numbers may actually lead to a decrease in quality with more poor quality and poor value programmes on offer:

*Both parties need to be careful about chasing targets...As we have seen in the past, such measures have put the quality of provision in jeopardy.*

Segal, 2014, p. 1

There is a parallel here with political announcements about increases in levels of employment, generally made without reference to the quality or stability of new jobs, which may be part of the precarious gig economy (Bracha and Burke, 2018, p. 159). Destination data are widely used to measure success based on Marxist theories of commodity; 'good' destinations are those that enhance the learner's 'labour power' (Williams, 2011, p. 276). Vivian et al. found that the majority (85 per cent) of former apprentices they interviewed had remained in employment following the end of their apprenticeship, 64 per cent with the same employer. A further seven per cent had become self-employed or continued training. Eight per cent said they were unemployed (Vivian et al., 2012, pp. 95-96). Although destination data are usually promoted as evidence that apprenticeships are successful (Education, Skills and Funding Agency, 2017), if these findings were extrapolated to all apprentices, almost 70,000 former apprentices each year would be unemployed following their apprenticeship, evidence that there is scope to improve the quality of outcomes.

The Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties in Britain each announced support for the apprenticeship programme prior to the 2015 general election, positioning it as a

political priority (Conservative Party, 2015; The Labour Party, 2015; Liberal Democrats, 2015). While the overall adult skills budget for 2015-16 was reduced by more than £249 million, an 11 per cent cut on 2014-15, the budget for apprenticeships actually increased (Evans, 2015; Lauener, 2015). This suggests that the Government prioritised apprenticeships at the expense of other education and training for adults. The shift in funding priorities, when combined with the introduction of a new tax (levy) and co-investment for employers, and the introduction of student fees within higher education, indicates an ideological and pragmatic desire to gradually shift the financial costs of education and training from the taxpayer onto employers or learners. Changes to funding could change the relationship between employer, training provider and apprentice and the quality of the apprentice experience (Newton et al., 2019, pp. 16-21; DBIS, 2015a, p. 22). As HE students fund more of their own education they become empowered as purchasers, albeit that they may feel unable to complain about the organisation that will be responsible for the award of their qualification. Apprentices do not pay for their apprenticeship training and have very little say about their choice of apprenticeship provider. It is too early to tell whether employers feel more empowered following the Richard reform of apprenticeships.

The latest apprenticeship funding reforms include a £1,000 payment for employers who take on a 16-18-year-old, care leavers, or those who have an Education, Health and Care plan (DfE, 2016), recognising persistent high rates of unemployment for young people and disadvantaged groups. At the time of writing in 2019, it is too early to judge the impact of this measure, but previous attempts to use apprenticeships to solve youth skills and employment problems have not worked (BMG Research and Institute for Employment

Studies, 2013, p.1 and p.12; Skills Funding Agency, 2015; 2014), and the proportion of apprentices aged 16-18 remains low at 22 per cent of all apprentices (DBIS, 2014), indicating that financial incentives alone have not been effective, and that other changes may be needed to increase the accessibility of the programme.

The Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Surveys and Apprentice Pay Surveys commissioned by the Government, provide some insights into the experience of apprentices (BEIS, 2017; IFF, 2017; Higton et al., 2014; and 2013; Vivian et al., 2012). Considering these surveys helps to establish the context for my study. A critical review of the surveys highlights gaps in qualitative data about apprentices, and demonstrates the need to develop new ways to theorise the issues that they raise. Recommendations from these reports have tended to focus on improving value for money and effectiveness for employers and, therefore, most quality measures within the surveys are linked to business benefits rather than benefits from the apprentices' perspective such as the 'portability' of the apprenticeship to other employers or the quality of the training; for example:

*...seven in ten employers reported that the Apprenticeship had helped their business improve its product or service as well as productivity.*

Higton et al., 2013, p. 77

Apprenticeships in most other countries cover a narrow array of jobs in the traditional craft skills and 'blue collar' trades such as carpentry, baking, welding and mechanical engineering. The word 'apprenticeship' is familiar, but for most people the term is also synonymous with these traditional 'skilled trades' (Keep and James, 2011, p. 55). In England, however, 'white collar' and service sector apprenticeships are also now available in administration,

management and higher-level professional roles such as a solicitor or actuary (IfA, 2019) and it is here that the policy ambition of achieving quality and parity of esteem with academic routes will be fought most fiercely.

In order for the apprenticeship programme in England to continue to expand, and to meet the needs of apprentices as the labour market changes, all apprenticeships need to be relevant and good quality (Newton et al., 2019, pp. 28-29). Policy on apprenticeships is often based on a market perspective that prioritises labour market needs and demand; for example, employers designing apprenticeship standards to meet their needs (DBIS, 2013, pp. 11-12). The literature confirms that this is the case, but it also demonstrates the impact that this can have on the way that apprentices are perceived, which may help to explain why their views have been largely ignored. Youth careers policy, for example, often takes a neo-liberal approach that reduces state involvement to simply providing access to information, discharging the state from any responsibility for its citizens' career planning (Asirvatham and Humphries-Kil, 2017, p. 129; Avis and Atkins, 2017, p. 170). This position assumes that if young people understand their own strengths, weaknesses and career aspirations and have access to local and global labour market information, as well as information on different education programmes, they will make rational decisions in order to optimise their own economic or social position (Asirvatham and Humphries-Kil, 2017, p. 131; Avis and Atkins, 2017, p. 168). Of course, this view assumes that everyone has the same view about what is rational, and that anyone whose main aim is anything other than earning more money, or advancing their social status is acting 'irrationally'. Brown (2012) argues that this policy is immoral because it puts all the responsibility and risk onto young

people. Furthermore, evidence suggests that neither young people, nor education institutions, are able to adapt quickly to local or national changes; one study in the north west of England found that young people continued to enrol in manufacturing courses despite limited employment opportunities following the decline of that industry (Hopkinson, 2010, p. 56). The UK Commission for Employment and Skills published a report highlighting 40 careers that offer the best future employment prospects (UKCES, 2014), yet such intelligence seems to have had little effect on applications for apprenticeships by sector (DBIS, 2014).

Since September 2012, schools in England have been responsible for providing independent information about careers options, including apprenticeships, to all pupils in years 8-13 (DfE, 2018b, p. 9). Despite the new responsibility, a review by Ofsted found that three quarters of schools do not provide effective and impartial careers guidance to students. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, said that students were not aware of the breadth of careers available and that school staff did not have up-to-date information. He also suggested that some schools were failing in their duty to provide impartial advice by promoting their own A-level offer rather than apprenticeships (Ofsted, 2013a, p. 4).

In summary, two dominant and contrasting theories of youth career choice have emerged. Whether apprentices are conceived in deficit or utilitarian terms affects their personal agency, their ability to act in order to affect their circumstances. It also affects their relationships with employer and training provider. The neo-liberal utilitarian approach dominates policy decisions, and the design of national apprentice data surveys. Current

discourse on apprenticeship quality, is therefore, dominated by reference to quantitative economic data.

### iii. Apprenticeship as an education or training programme

Apprenticeships can also be seen as an alternative to other types of education and a means for individuals to improve their own knowledge and skills. This conception of apprenticeships means that quality will be measured in terms of the apprentice's learning journey and will inevitably be compared to other types of learning. With this deficit model, individual apprentices are responsible for their own educational success or failure (Avis and Atkins, 2017, pp. 173-174). The apprentice and training provider will be seen as key stakeholders. **Error! Reference source not found.** refers to the proximity of apprenticeships to other education and training systems. In countries like Germany, with a dual apprenticeship system, apprenticeships are seen as part of an overall education system and learners can move between parallel, or 'dual', academic and vocational routes at fixed points. In England apprenticeships are part of a separate training system, and with the removal of recognised national qualifications such as NVQs from apprenticeships, opportunities for an apprentice to transfer to other education or training programmes are decreasing (Fuller, 2016, p. 429).

The outcome of any apprenticeship is defined as full occupational competence in the relevant job. On completion, an apprentice should have acquired all the knowledge and skills that a person performing that job to a national standard would have (IfA, 2017a).

Dreyfus and Dreyfus developed a five-stage model of adult skill acquisition, describing

'competency' as the third stage of progression from 'novice' to 'expertise' (Dreyfus, 2004, pp. 177-180). The concept of progressing from an apprenticeship to become a journeyman, and eventually a master, underpinned early apprenticeships, and is still a feature of vocational training in countries such as Latvia, Norway and Poland (Cedefop, 2018, pp. 22, 26, 30). This view of progression supports Dreyfus and Dreyfus' model of skills acquisition, but it is not a feature of the current English apprenticeship system. In most countries, all apprenticeships are at the same level, equivalent to the English level 3 apprenticeship, but in England, apprenticeships are available at levels 2-7 (Appendix B provides an explanation of qualification levels), and apprentices may progress from one apprenticeship to a further apprenticeship at a higher level. Effectively, an individual can complete one apprenticeship, achieving competence, then immediately return to stage one, being classified as a novice by starting another apprenticeship and developing a slightly different set of competences. Theorising apprenticeship as a means of acquiring narrow and measurable sets of competences may prevent decision makers from developing educational processes that can actually develop learners' personal practices, allowing them to become occupationally adept (Billett, 2016b, p. 200).

In some countries, additional study is required in order to supervise or train apprentices; in Switzerland, this involves attainment of a *Brevet fédéral*, and in Germany, the *Ausbildung der Ausbilder* licence (Bliem et al., 2016, p. 40). In Switzerland, any company that wishes to employ and train an apprentice must obtain accreditation from the canton VET office. Authorisation is only granted to companies that can prove that their operation and staff meet minimum requirements (Suter-Hoffmann, 2015, pp. 8, 18). England has no minimum

requirements for an employer, although apprentice training providers must be on the Register of Apprentice Training Providers (RoATP), and assessment organisations must be on the Register of End-Point Assessment Organisations (RoEPAO) (ESFA, 2018a; 2018b). In England, at least twenty per cent of training must be delivered off-the-job (DfE, 2017b, p. 11), meaning that up to eighty per cent will be delivered on-the-job, with employers responsible for the on-the-job element. This is relevant to my study because the absence of any accreditation check on employers, and few checks on this aspect of delivery, suggests the potential for the workplace to be an area where the quality of training could be compromised. Apprentices are likely to be well placed to help determine what employers can do to support quality training.

Guidance from the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA, 2017a) explains that knowledge, skills and behaviours are essential features of all apprenticeships, and the quality of training affects how these are delivered and enhanced. To complete the apprenticeship, the apprentice must pass an independent end-point assessment that assesses performance across the whole apprenticeship. Understanding the three domains of Bloom's Taxonomy can help explain the difference between knowledge, skills and behaviours. The six stages of the cognitive domain cover the lower-order learning of 'knowledge', 'comprehension', and 'application'; and the higher-order learning of 'analysis', 'synthesis', and 'evaluation' (Nentl and Zietlow, 2008, p. 160). During assessment, apprentices will have to demonstrate a recall of facts, but also apply, explain and evaluate knowledge in different contexts.



Traditional craft apprenticeships, such as butcher (IfA, 2017b), require the manipulation of tools and materials, Bloom's psychomotor domain. The psychomotor domain does not relate so easily to the growing number of 'non-craft' apprenticeships in jobs such as hospitality team member (IfA, 2017c) or actuary (IfA, 2017d). These types of service-sector and professional jobs are not primarily concerned with the physical manipulation of tools or materials. For an actuary, the knowledge element of the apprenticeship is expressed as knowledge of broad disciplines or fields such as mathematics, statistics and economics. The skills element of the actuary apprenticeship consists of the higher order cognitive learning from Bloom's Taxonomy, such as analysis, problem solving and risk management, as well as an ability to use certain forms and processes (IfA, 2017d). In England, the behaviours of the apprentice will also be assessed to ensure that the apprentice carries out the job in the way that employers across the particular sector want.

Having used literature to help explain some of the theory surrounding learning, I now provide some context for this study of the apprenticeship programme in the late 2010s. At the time of writing in 2019, there are two sets of criteria operating in England and two types of apprenticeship: the first is an apprenticeship 'framework', usually designed by a sector body representing employers within a particular employment sector. Frameworks must meet a set of rigid requirements laid out in a statutory document called the *Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England* or 'SASE' (DfE, 2017a). SASE requires each apprenticeship framework to list specific qualifications and requirements, and once an apprentice has achieved each of these, the apprenticeship is complete and a certificate is issued. Apprenticeship 'standards' were introduced in 2015 as a result of the Richard

Review of Apprenticeships (Richard, 2012). Standards are designed by groups of employers, called 'Trailblazers', and are replacing frameworks. The main phase of my fieldwork took place during 2015-17 when the vast majority of apprentices were on frameworks rather than the new standards. Of the 33 apprentices that took part in this study, just five were on new standards. I did not set out to explore whether the type of apprenticeship that the apprentices were on had an impact on their experience, because it is too early to do so, but it is important to explain the two types of apprenticeship in order to position my study within the changing apprenticeship landscape.

To theorise this shift, apprenticeships are moving from a training programme that included a portmanteau of qualifications, to being an end product. Prior to the introduction of apprenticeship standards, the reliance on qualifications meant that little effort was made to quality assure the training itself (Wolf, 2011, pp. 54-66). Most new apprenticeships do not include separate qualifications and the apprenticeship itself will act as a qualification. In effect, the apprenticeship is changing from being the process by which an individual gains skills, to also being the end product, providing the evidence of skills acquisition. This is a clear example of how changes in policy affect the nature of apprenticeships. Over time, employers recognised specific qualifications within their sectors. We do not know the extent to which all employers understand the content of new apprenticeship standards and how they are assessed, and this is an aspect of the reform that has an obvious impact on individual apprentices. If employers do not value the apprenticeship brand, the transferability of an apprentice's training to a new employer or job will be reduced (Fuller et al., 2017, p. 4).

The Trailblazer groups of employers who design apprenticeship standards also decide how the knowledge, skills and behaviours should be assessed (IfA, 2018c). The intention behind this is to ensure that the knowledge, skills and behaviours that employers say are important are assessed (IfA, 2017a). According to Richard, the quality of assessment should be measured by the extent to which it is 'genuinely respected by industry' (Richard, 2012, p. 18). The process of developing and approving apprenticeship standards, therefore, gives precedence to the employer voice, but in reality, not every employer will be part of a Trailblazer group, and small employers in particular may not feel that their views are represented (Newton et al., 2019, p. 15). The views of apprentices have not been formally recognised in the process for development or approval of apprenticeship frameworks or standards, so the process misses out on their ideas about the relevance of the learning content, and validity of the assessment.

At the start of my research in 2015, apprenticeship frameworks were available in approximately 230 occupational areas (Federation of Industry Sector Skills and Standards, 2015). As new apprenticeship standards are developed, the equivalent frameworks are withdrawn, and in July 2018, when the launch of the 300<sup>th</sup> apprenticeship standard was announced, the number of frameworks had dropped to 144 (IfA, 2018b; Federation of Industry Sector Skills and Standards, 2018). The greater number of standards could be interpreted as offering greater choice for those wishing to take an apprenticeship. In fact, increased choice is not a given, because each standard is linked to a specific job, whereas frameworks could cover a range of different roles, giving apprentices access to a range of

job options. The wording used in the official announcement of the 300<sup>th</sup> apprenticeship standard is evidence of a market-led, capitalist approach to training, emphasising the choice and fit for employers, with no mention of benefits for individuals who may wish to become apprentices:

*Businesses want to see these standards in place as soon as possible.*

IfA, 2018b

Despite recent growth, the low proportion of all workers who are apprentices suggests that there is still considerable potential for expansion of the English apprenticeship programme, with greater numbers of employers offering apprenticeships and a larger proportion of school leavers entering an apprenticeship. The picture in England is very different to apprenticeship programmes in Switzerland and Germany, which attract 43 and 40 apprentices per 1,000 people employed (Table 1). A House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility (April 2016, p.50) claimed that apprenticeships in Switzerland and Germany are more attractive to young people, because they do not suffer from a lack of parity with other learning options, as is witnessed in England (Cameron, 2013). There is an obvious disparity between the Government's desire to increase the numbers of people taking apprenticeships (Cameron, 2013), and the continued 'premium on intellectual and abstract knowledge as opposed to practical skills' (Ainley, 1990, p. 9). In May 2001, Tony Blair announced a Labour manifesto target for 50 per cent of young people to go to university (Blair, 2001). Although the target has been widely criticised for being 'arbitrary and meaningless' (Turner, 2010; Kirkup, 2008), it cemented academic degrees as the aspiration for young people, and for their parents.

The ongoing quest for parity with other learning has been an enormous distraction for apprenticeship policy, further confusing the purpose of the programme, and leading to a series of misguided changes designed to make apprenticeships seem more like qualifications such as A-levels, instead of focusing on the quality of apprenticeships in their own right (Wolf, 2011, p. 111). The legacy of the degree target has been that, although 92 per cent of parents consider apprenticeships a good option, only 32 per cent thought them a suitable option for their own children (O’Leary and Wybron, 2015). A report by Ofsted on careers advice in schools found that in England:

*The A-level route to universities remained the ‘gold standard’ for young people, their parents and teachers.*

Ofsted, 2013a, p. 4

Where apprenticeships are conceptualised as a type of education, quality measures will relate to the quality of training. This is difficult to measure, however, and apprenticeship completion is often included in official statistics, and used as a proxy for quality (Woods, 2017), in particular to judge the quality of organisations that provide training for apprentices. Steedman’s data (Table 1) suggest that, at 72 per cent, there is scope to improve completion rates in England. Completion rate data do not usually attempt to explain the numerous reasons why an apprentice may not complete (Frey, 2005, pp. 1, 4), or whether completion of an apprenticeship itself can be linked with apprentice satisfaction or success at work (Jones, 2011, p. 55). What counts as success is socially constructed, so, for some, completing the apprenticeship may signify success, whereas others may put higher value on a satisfactory experience, or on what happens as a result of the apprenticeship. Hogarth et al. (2009) produced a report for the Learning and Skills Council reviewing the literature and summarising factors associated with drop-out and completion. Their report

provides a helpful taxonomy (Table 3) that can be used to support an understanding of the contribution of apprentice, employer, training provider, and overarching policy, to the outcome of the apprenticeship (Hogarth et al., 2009, p. 49).

	<b>Factors related to non-completion</b>	<b>Factors related to completion</b>
<b>Individual Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ill health</li> <li>• Pregnancy</li> <li>• Dismissal</li> <li>• Mismatch between capabilities of apprentice and the apprenticeship</li> <li>• Redundancy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good aptitude for chosen framework</li> <li>• Good educational qualifications</li> </ul>
<b>Employer features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mismatch between needs of employer and apprenticeship requirements</li> <li>• Limited experience of apprenticeships</li> <li>• Limited commitment</li> <li>• Not providing sufficient time for training and learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rigorous recruitment processes</li> <li>• Involvement of parents in recruitment</li> <li>• Partnership between apprentice, employer and training provider</li> <li>• Clear linking of training to current and future job within company</li> <li>• Requirement to complete apprenticeship for future employment</li> <li>• Linking apprentice wage increases to Apprenticeship milestones</li> </ul>
<b>Provider characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient monitoring of apprentice's progress</li> <li>• Insufficient liaison with employer</li> <li>• Poor management of programme</li> <li>• Poorly designed courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership with employer</li> <li>• Flexible provision to meet needs of employer and apprentice</li> <li>• Good course design</li> <li>• Continuity of staff (develops relationship with employer)</li> <li>• Timely monitoring of progress</li> </ul>
<b>System features</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking funding to completion</li> <li>• Inspection by Ofsted and introduction of Minimum Levels of Performance</li> </ul>

Table 3: Factors Associated with Drop-out and Completion (Hogarth et al., 2009, p. 49)

Other authors have identified additional factors that impact on completion; for example, personal issues such as homelessness, caring responsibilities the complexity of young peoples' lives more generally can make continuing with training more difficult (Du Plessis et al., 2012; Chan, 2011b; Hill and Dalley-Trim, 2008; Ball et al., 2000, p. 118). Much of the research in this area seems to have little impact on policy decisions, possibly because it does not reach policy decision makers, but it could provide valuable evidence to improve the quality of the apprenticeship experience.

Steedman's data (Table 1) also highlight national differences with the definition and content of an apprenticeship, emphasising the difficulties of trying to replicate the causes of success of apprenticeships in one country within the context of another country. In England, for example, most apprentices are working towards level 2 qualifications, whilst in most other European countries level 3 is the lowest level of apprenticeship. Level 2 is equivalent to GCSE grades A\*-C, generally what is expected of a 16-year-old. Level 3 is equivalent to A-levels, the standard expected of an 18-year-old (see Appendix B: Qualification Levels for a more detailed explanation of qualification levels). The Labour Party Skills Taskforce argued that level 2 is not appropriate for an apprenticeship, comparing England to other countries where apprenticeships enjoy a higher status (Husbands, 2013, p. 4). Some critics of the current system claim that level 2 apprenticeships undermine the apprenticeship brand, as does the minimum duration in England, which, although it was increased in 2012 (DBIS, 2012a) to 12 months, remains far shorter than in other countries (Keep, 2015, p. 118; Dolphin 2014, p. 39; Husbands, 2013, pp. 1-4). In England there is considerable variety in the prior experience of apprentices; some apprentices join straight from school or college,

some from unemployment, while others are existing members of staff, what Fuller et al. (2017) refer to as ‘conversions’. This means that apprentices begin their apprenticeships with a wide range of different levels of educational achievement and expectations.

Training is an integral part of the apprenticeship experience. For all apprentices, time is divided between work and training, but there is huge variation in how training is organised (DfE, 2017b). Research is essential to make sense of, and theorise the implications of, this unique and unruly mix of learning and training, and the partnership between apprentice, employer and training provider. The requirement for both on- and off-the-job training seeks to ensure that apprentices learn the relevant theory and develop skills related to the job, as well as improving broader ‘transferable’ skills such as teamwork, English and mathematics.

Statutory definitions of on- and off-the-job training are rather circular:

*“off-the-job training” ... is training which— (a) is received for the purposes of the skill, trade or occupation to which the framework relates, and (b) is not on-the-job training;*

*“on-the-job training” ... is training received in the course of carrying on the skill, trade or occupation to which the (apprenticeship) framework relates.  
Great Britain, Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, s. 27(4)*

On-the-job training includes observing and copying experienced colleagues and repeating tasks in order to practise skills. The quality of on-the-job training can vary and it may be referred to as ‘training at the workbench’, or the more derogatory, “have ten minutes with Nellie – she’ll show yer” (Hawkins, 2008, p. 25). The quality of on-the-job training depends on the skills and knowledge of colleagues, but unlike countries such as Germany and Switzerland, in England employers do not need any sort of licence to demonstrate their own



competence in order to take on an apprentice (Bliem et al., 2016, p. 40). Off-the-job training includes time at college, although it can be carried out in the workplace; for example, watching demonstrations, undertaking simulations, and making samples or test pieces; a practice that links back to the traditional ‘apprentice piece’, such as a miniature cabinet. The skills acquired depend on which apprenticeship is being taken, but can include ‘craft skills’ such as wood turning or welding, ‘professional skills’ such as bookkeeping, and ‘soft skills’ such as communicating with customers, managing staff or prioritising workloads. Apprenticeship training is usually delivered through a partnership between the employer and a training provider, which may be a private training company, college of further education or higher education institution (HEI). Approximately 63 per cent of apprentices are registered with a private training provider and 30 per cent with a further education college (DfE, 2018c). The involvement of HEIs is small but growing rapidly with the increase in higher-level apprenticeships (Bravenboer, 2016).

The pedagogy, location and amount of apprenticeship training also varies. Training may be delivered wholly in the workplace, by day release where the apprentice attends a training institution for certain hours each week, or by block release where the apprentice attends college or university full-time for a few weeks or months, then returns to work to continue with the training. Some apprentices have regular classes, demonstrations and workshop sessions, but others receive a few instructions or a workbook, and are then left to produce their own evidence. All this diversity means that apprenticeships are inherently messy and this makes the topic of apprenticeship quality problematic as a locus for research. I have

tried to use the literature to demonstrate the messiness and to help explain how it has come about.

For young people, undertaking an apprenticeship represents a significant change from school, because it involves employment, and both on- and off-the-job learning. I have found only a limited literature investigating the impact of this mixed approach to learning on the overall effectiveness or cohesiveness of learning, although Alison Wolf (2011) and more recently, Fuller and Unwin (2015), and Chankseliani and James Relly (2015) have each investigated aspects of the topic, and identified a need for greater collaboration between employer and training provider. Apprenticeships go beyond the integration of theory and practice, where something is learned in theory and then applied within the workplace. They include learning 'in' the workplace, not just applying theory but the theory emerging out of the work. The language and culture of the workplace can be significantly different from that of an education or learning institution, and without the support of a mentor the apprentice may be left to negotiate the different environments for him or herself (Daloz, 2012). At present, there is no requirement for apprentices to be provided with a mentor, for either the training or workplace aspects of the programme, although having a mentor is considered to be good practice. The IfA (2017e) published a quality statement highlighting the importance of providing a mentor in order to ensure that the workplace is motivating and supportive, but it is only guidance.

Many young people undertake an apprenticeship at the same level as qualifications that they already have; for example, GCSEs or A-levels. Any apprenticeship is usually portrayed

as beneficial for the apprentice (Halfon, 2017), and this may be the case where the apprentice is acquiring new skills in order to enter a new occupation, but I argue that not all apprenticeships represent value, particularly where they are not undertaken as a result of informed choice. Four out of five level 2 apprentices in 2013-14, already had a qualification at level 2 or above, and 56 per cent of level 3 apprentices already had a qualification at the same or higher level (DBIS, 2016c, pp. 5-6). This may happen by accident, as a result of a limited supply of higher apprenticeships, or a conscious decision to fill a skills gap linked to the notion of 'careership', a choice to support entry to a particular occupational field (Hodkinson, 2008, p. 8). The opportunity to be employed, and the specific skills and knowledge that apprenticeships include, may be of value for those wanting to work in particular occupations where the apprenticeship may act as a 'licence to practice' or gateway to that occupation, but for some individuals, such decisions could be a waste of time, or could even harm career prospects (Hawkins, 2008, pp. 25-26).

In England, 35 per cent of former Level 2 apprentices go on to complete another apprenticeship at a higher level (Higton et al., 2013; Richard, 2012, p. 53). Moving from one apprenticeship to another may not represent genuine progression for a number of reasons; firstly, an apprenticeship framework includes a number of elements such as 'Employment Rights and Responsibilities', and 'Personal Learning and Thinking Skills', designed to help new workers develop personal skills and adjust to the world of work. Apprenticeship standards have similar features and undertaking more than one apprenticeship will always involve 'deadweight', training that adds little or no value (Richard, 2012, p. 53). Secondly, for someone to complete the first apprenticeship and then take another within the same

occupational area means that they continue to be labelled ‘an apprentice’, a label that is legitimately linked to the notion of being a trainee or novice. Any individual could benefit from the acquisition of new and higher-level skills which give them access to promotion opportunities, but there will usually be a number of ways to achieve this, and alternatives such as a programme of continued professional development (CPD) activities may be more effective. Progressing to a second or third apprenticeship could devalue both the individual and the initial apprenticeship, by suggesting that the apprentice never actually achieved occupational competence (Woods, 2017). Finally, depending on the circumstances, someone moving from one apprenticeship to another may continue to be subject to the apprenticeship rate of National Minimum Wage (DBIS, 2015b), meaning that they may be paid less than others undertaking the same job. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy may result in even more employees being encouraged to undertake second or third apprenticeships as employers try to use up their levy funds.

Successive large-scale Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Surveys within the UK found that only around two thirds of apprentices were actually aware that they were on an apprenticeship (Higton et al., 2014, p. 9). This suggests that for one third of participants the apprenticeship training and, presumably, the ‘experience’ itself goes unnoticed. Authors have attempted to explain these surprising data by reference to the high proportion of apprentices who were existing employees (Fuller and Unwin, 2015), but it may also be due to confusion over the purpose of apprenticeships, and the inclusion of training that may not be sufficiently distinguished from the continuous learning and development that any

employee undertakes. It is hard to reconcile this lack of awareness with the notion of quality:

*The term “apprenticeship” has lost the weight it had when it was originally conceived in the sixteenth century, and has...become a blanket term. It covers: temporary and transient positions..., juvenile workers...(little or no training) and “genuine apprentices”.*

Hawkins, 2008, p. 24

The government’s decision to ring-fence the term in law can be seen as a reaction to employer dissatisfaction with the quality of training. This was a problem because, not only does the government invest approximately £1.5 billion each year to fund the cost of apprenticeship training, but the programme is central to its skills strategy (DBIS, 2015c). The survey findings may also reflect the way that apprentices identify themselves; some may identify more as an employee than an apprentice, and this could be because of the stigma associated with the label ‘apprentice’, and with vocational skills in general (Ainley, 1990, p. 9).

Rather than attempting to tackle the quality of the training directly, policymakers have attempted to address the issue through the introduction of a requirement for each apprentice to receive a minimum of twenty per cent off-the-job training. This must be evidenced by the employer and training provider, but again there is little mention of the quality of this training, with such matters being left to Ofsted and HEFCE, or the Office for Students (DfE, 2017b, p. 11). In January 2018 the Education Select Committee heard evidence about the quality of apprenticeships and Joe Dromey, from the Institute for Public Policy Research, suggested that currently no one body is responsible. Dr Lee Elliot Major of the Sutton Trust said of the inspection regime, *“We don’t think it’s fit for purpose”*

(Education Committee, 16 January 2018). The Learning & Work Institute also raised concern about the capacity of Ofsted:

*The recent expansion in the number of providers approved to deliver apprenticeships raises the question of whether Ofsted has sufficient resource to inspect such a large number of providers.*

Learning & Work Institute, 2018, p. 9

Following the Richard Review employers in England have been given new responsibilities for designing apprenticeship standards, however, the freedoms are limited with legislation and government bodies controlling every aspect from funding, to design and quality control. In many cases choice has simply been delegated back to sector skills bodies and training providers, presumably because employers do not feel that they are best placed to design or deliver training. The Learning and Skills Council suggested that there is:

*...a body of evidence about the economic benefit of apprenticeships but not so much on the detail of delivery.*

Rudd et al., 2008, p. 5

The literature supports this view; there is a lack of evidence and theory regarding the quality of training and the learning experience for the apprentice. This is perhaps due to the difficulties inherent in studying such a heterogeneous programme, and there is a lack of clarity in the literature about what quality apprenticeships look like from a pedagogical perspective. When the quality of apprenticeships is criticised in comparison to other types of learning, there is very little empirical evidence with which to respond.

#### **iv. Apprenticeships as a social construct**

Although policy makers would like to suggest that apprenticeships are relatively straightforward, a review of the literature so far suggests that this is far from the case. The

gap between rhetoric and reality suggests that something else is going on. There are social and political factors at work that result in the current chaotic situation. Conceptualising apprenticeship in a different way could have the potential to make greater sense of the chaos identified. Apprenticeship can be viewed as a social construct, a sociocultural process involving interacting with others (Chankseliani and James Relly, 2015, p. 516; Hogarth et al., 2009, p. 49). These factors are well accounted for in social constructionism which focuses attention on the social and cultural processes that come into play in any context. That Vygotsky's original work placed emphasis on the relationship between the learner and the wider society, makes it particularly appropriate for this context (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). In the case of an apprenticeship, the key relationship is between the learner, training provider and employer.

While research has focused on particular aspects of this relationship (Fuller and Unwin, 2010; Hogarth et al., 2009), this study focuses on the position of the apprentice as learner, which, as the earlier parts of this chapter show, has been neglected. This neglect is, of course, an indication of the interplay of various social forces, so I am looking at sets of social processes that the literature has largely ignored to see if constructs like success and quality can be reviewed. Hogarth et al.'s findings focus on the contribution of training providers (Table 3), and others such as Fuller and Unwin (2010) have investigated the role of the employer. I am focusing my research on the area of the model of learning as a social construct where my literature review suggests there is least research, namely the way that apprentices construct the quality and success of apprenticeships, and the relationship of the apprentice to the other partners involved in the delivery of training. I have been unable to

find literature that adequately explains the theory from the apprentice's point-of-view, how the apprentice defines the quality of an apprenticeship, or the role that the apprentice plays in determining whether or not the apprenticeship is successful. Conceptualising apprenticeships as a social process means that quality can be conceived in terms of the apprentice's experience and personal measures of success.

A survey of 5,000 current and recent apprentices found that 89 per cent of respondents reported satisfaction with their apprenticeship, although, those who rated their satisfaction at five or more out of ten were not asked to specify what contributed to satisfaction (Vivian et al., 2012, pp. 14, 145). The four per cent classed as dissatisfied (giving an overall satisfaction rating of less than five out of ten) were asked to comment on the causes of their dissatisfaction, and gave a number of reasons including;

*A lack of support from their provider, poor organisation and communication on the part of the provider, and a lack of support or training from their employer.*

Vivian et al., 2012, p. 10

It is clear, therefore, that from an apprentices' point-of-view, relationships and social interactions with both employer and training provider are central to quality. A related survey, carried out the following year (Higton et al., 2013, p. 41) found very similar levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction to Vivian et al. This time the main reasons for dissatisfaction were: lack of support or contact from the provider (41 per cent); poor organisation (31 per cent); not learning anything new (21 per cent); problems with the timeframe of the apprenticeship (20 per cent). This supports the idea that individual apprentices might be seeking a range of things in order to define the experience as satisfactory. In contrast, much of the effort for a succession of recent apprenticeship reforms has gone into higher-level



systemic changes to the national programme that are unlikely to solve the sorts of issues relating to poor organisation and delivery mentioned by apprentices in Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Surveys (Higton et al., 2013, p. 41). The shortcomings highlighted by the Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Surveys support the case for an alternative approach. The discourses created by makers of policy, which I challenge in earlier sections, have led to social processes, driven by policy makers too often focused on higher level change. Deficiencies in this social process have resulted in additional complexity without a resolution of issues (Wolf, 2011, p. 57), which highlights the need to take into account the social process revealed by talking to apprentices, which is of course, a social process itself.

For younger apprentices, the apprenticeship represents a transition from compulsory education to work; a critical point in their lives as they move between childhood and adulthood (Hodkinson et al., 1996). The youth transitions literature often treats young people as a homogeneous group following predictable linear paths from school to university or work (Taylor, 2005; Anderson, 1983, p. 13). Social, political and economic changes mean that the traditional view of linear career paths is now largely considered irrelevant, with research into youth transitions highlighting the experience of young people coping with prolonged education, unemployment, temporary work or a series of occupational false starts or 'job shopping' (Quintini and Martin, 2006, p. 13, Heinz and Krüger, 2001, p. 42; Dwyer, 1997, p. 75). Factors such as pregnancy and homelessness can interrupt transitions and learners may be living as, or in danger of becoming, part of a social class known as the 'precariat' whose lives lack certainty and security (Savage et al., 2013; Johnston et al., 2000). These debates suggest that young people's lives and career paths are increasingly

fragmented and heterogeneous and this affects the way that young people view apprenticeship and what the construct means to them.

As 49 per cent of young people in England now go to university, the point at which many make the transition from education to work is later than for previous generations (DfE, 2017c; Bird, 2014). There is evidence that linear career paths endure to some extent in countries with a heavily regulated system of education and training such as Germany, where young people are more likely to move through different phases of education and training at fixed points (Hamilton, 1987). Recent research on transition focuses on a wider and more individualised view of transitions throughout a life course rather than the transition from school to work (Unwin et al., 2015, p. 2). It is therefore essential to understand the way that individual apprentices construct their identities as learners and workers.

Literature on youth identity and career choice has become dominated by two main theories: social determinism and self-determinism. Youth choice became a popular research topic in the 1960s (Cohen and Ainley, 2000, p. 84) and theories of social determinism were dominant (Berger and Luckman, 1966). These theories drew from the earlier social theories of Durkheim, Marx and Weber. Social reproduction is used to describe how resources, such as social, cultural, financial, symbolic and human capital, limit career choice and economic success, whereby social class is reproduced over generations, with limited opportunity for social mobility (Bourdieu, 2015; Marx, 1967, p.16). The concept of habitus suggests that individuals develop habits and ways of thinking based on their view of their surroundings, and therefore, groups with similar backgrounds will share similar cultures, histories and

views, and also similar experiences and opportunities (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133).

During the late 1980s and 1990s, high youth unemployment led to a renewed interest in the topic of career choice (Hodkinson et al., 1996; Banks et al., 1992). At this time capitalist, liberal and individualist theories held that individuals were responsible for their own success or failure, with success being deserved and failure caused by a lack of initiative or motivation (Beck 1992; Giddens, 1991). Those who were out of work were encouraged to 'get on your bikes'. The result of this is that young people are encouraged to '*conceptualise their biographies as the outcome of individual choice, aspiration or failure*' (Thompson, 2011, p. 787).

These competing theories remain relevant to policy on careers advice, with proponents of self-determinism arguing that if young people are given information about different careers, they will make a rational choice in order to maximise their income. An alternative conclusion is that many young people accept that they have no real choice, and are not interested in career planning (Walther, 2009; Hannan et al., 1995). Proponents of social determinism argue that policy should focus on improving accessibility and reducing the effects of social inequality.

The literature has continued to evolve with the introduction of ideas such as self-efficacy, and post facto rationalisation. Self-efficacy describes an individual's belief in his or her ability to succeed; it affects the individual's approach to goals, tasks and challenges (Grier-

Reed and Skaar, 2010, p. 43). Self-efficacy has an impact on feelings of ‘self-determination’, the way that the individual’s view of self influences his or her determination and resilience (Bandura, 2012). Self-efficacy supports the notion of agency, the extent to which an individual is able to utilise opportunities in order to affect outcomes (Schoon, 2018, p. 6). It has been argued that some apprentices rationalise their situation post facto, in order to downplay their relative lack of academic success and social position (Lehmann, 2005, pp. 337-339). It is possible to integrate the different schools of thought, by suggesting that individuals seek instead to frame success in their own cultural terms (Lehmann, 2005, p. 325). Rather than having no choice, it is possible that young people actually base decisions on a completely different frame of reference; for example, working-class boys may eschew ‘middle class’ academic pathways in favour of manual work that reinforces their cultural identity (Willis, 2000, p. 129), or the expectations of peers (Hemsley-Brown, 1999, pp. 95-96).

Debates about social and individual determinism have become quite circular, with proponents of each view criticising others for ignoring important factors. My position is that choice and success are products of a complicated interaction between societal and individual characteristics. Despite this complexity, careers and apprenticeship policies continue to be based on theories of economic-liberalism and rational choice, with limited attempts to address social inequalities often relegated to an afterthought.

The concept of ‘being’ an apprentice is central to the idea of apprenticeship as a mode of learning, rather than a mode of education (Billett, 2016a, pp. 616-618). Increasingly

apprenticeships provide access to occupational or professional communities; for example, through membership schemes or licences to practice. Although currently under-researched, links to membership bodies may help apprentices feel part of a community of practice, and support the vocational learning process (Brockmann, 2012; Chan, 2011a, p. 13). Rylatt (2001), Kofman and Senge (1995), and Lave and Wenger (1991) all suggest that feeling part of a community of practice helps people successfully move into an employed role and progress from novice to expert. Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on identity continues to influence research (Irving and Sayre, 2016, p. 1156; Barab et al., 2002, p. 495).

Apprenticeships are fertile ground for researching the trajectory of an individual from the periphery to the core of a profession or community of practice; this is at the heart of the medieval apprenticeship model, giving apprentices access to the relevant Guild and protecting professional knowledge and expertise. Identity is a vast and complex topic, and was not a core element of my research project, but I have included a reference to identity here, because of the idea that a successful apprenticeship will transform the individual and the importance of the social elements of learning and work.

A small-scale study involving ten apprentices in the workplace and school in the Netherlands uncovered a mismatch between the different aims and cultures associated with employment and learning, which was confusing and unhelpful for the student (Akkerman and Bakker, 2012, p. 155). This study is consistent with the findings of an earlier UK study:

*For [the apprentice], the worlds of garage and college were totally different.*

Hodkinson et al., 1996, pp. 41-44

Hodkinson et al. also highlighted other issues caused by poor liaison between employer and training provider: a mismatch between employer needs and the training course, poor monitoring of progress, and the employer's limited experience of the programme. Wolf (2011, p. 125) criticised employers who fail to engage with the programme content and did not understand what their apprentices were learning. These problems are not new; James Callaghan urged closer engagement between industry and education in 1976:

*To what extent are these deficiencies [in preparing young people for work] the result of insufficient co-operation between schools and industry?*

Callaghan, 1976

The period 1945-75 has been described as the 'golden age' of apprenticeships, but people interviewed about their experiences from that period describe powerlessness, bullying and physical abuse (Vickerstaff, 2003, p. 278). Vickerstaff carried out a small study of 30 self-selected volunteers, recalling experiences of their apprenticeships from fifty years earlier. The accounts of the participants are revealing, although they may include more recall bias than usual, because of the amount of time having passed.

From the perspective of learning as a social process, the relationship between the apprentice, employer and training provider is critical to the apprentice experience. Many employers take on apprentices after an approach from a training provider (Wolf, 2011, p. 125), and in such a situation the employer may never see the need to engage with the programme. By 'engage' I mean to really understand the content of the programme and discuss with others how best to support the apprentice. Employers may view education and training as someone else's job and rely on training providers to manage the entire apprenticeship; however, in order to improve the quality of apprenticeships it is important

for all the partners to engage and to share responsibility for the training (Chankseliani and James Relly, 2015, p. 516). Literature suggests that the relationship is not working yet. Highton et al., for example, noted that employers as well as apprentices were not always aware that an apprenticeship was taking place (Highton et al., 2013, p. 77). It is easy to see how this situation may lead to a poor-quality experience from the apprentices' perspective, because without the employer's input it will be very hard to ensure that the learning is integrated with, or relevant to the work. Theorising learning as a social process recognises that effective learning cannot happen in isolation.

Work-based training is a specific type of learning that embodies experiential 'learning by doing' (Kolb, 1984). If it is not delivered well, it may be reduced to demonstrating competence and accumulating qualifications, rather than utilising social interactions in order to develop broader skills needed for the current and future workplace (Billett, 2016b, p. 200; Eraut, 2002, pp. 66-68). Work-based training may also be reduced to gaining proficiency or expertise (Dreyfus, 2004, pp. 79-80), rather than inducting the individual into a wider community and transforming her into a motivated and productive member of society. Since 2016 apprenticeship funding rules require that a 'commitment statement' is signed by the employer, training provider and apprentice (Skills Funding Agency, 2016, p. 30). The purpose of a commitment statement is to ensure that all parties understand their role in delivering the apprenticeship. The document should also symbolise the commitment by each party to each other, and to the success of the apprenticeship as a joint enterprise. It is not yet clear how the presence of a document will affect the behaviours and practices of any of its signatories, so it was important to test this as part of my research. The Great

Britain, *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009* also requires a contract, known as an Apprenticeship Agreement, between the apprentice and employer. The contract provides similar employment rights and obligations to other employers and employees.

Following their analysis of workplace learning over a number of years, Fuller and Unwin (2010, p. 7) devised a conceptual model describing a continuum of expansive to restrictive apprenticeships (Table 4). Expansive apprenticeships are defined as those that integrate learning and work including a rewarding job design, whereas restrictive apprenticeships limit learning and work to specific tasks with little time for reflection.

This model provided me with a starting point with which to consider the quality of apprenticeships using a socially constructed lens. The model's focus is on the specific ways that employers may conceive apprenticeships and apprentices, and how this can affect the quality and effectiveness of the apprenticeship by improving the learning environment. It provided a new way to see apprentices, moving the aims of the apprenticeship programme on from a narrow focus on achieving occupational competence (Billett, 2016b, p. 200; Watkins et al., 2012; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009), to bringing about a change in the individual apprentice (Rocks and Lavender, 2018; Illeris, 2014, p. 40). The model does not show how apprentices themselves can influence the quality of their apprenticeship.





	EXPANSIVE	RESTRICTIVE
C1	Apprenticeship is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the individual and organisational capability	Apprenticeship is used to tailor individual capability to organisational need
C2	Workplace and provider share a post-Apprenticeship vision: progression for career	Post-Apprenticeship vision: static for job
C3	Apprentice has dual status as learner and employee: explicit recognition of, and support for, apprentice's status as learner	Status as employee dominates: status as learner restricted to minimum required to meet Apprenticeships Framework
C4	Apprentice makes a gradual transition to productive worker and expertise in occupational field	Fast transition to productive worker with limited knowledge of occupational field; or existing, already productive, workers as apprentices with minimal development
C5	Apprentice is treated as a member of an occupational and workplace community with access to the community's rules, history, knowledge and practical expertise	Apprentice treated as extra pair of hands who only needs access to limited knowledge and skills to perform job
C6	Apprentice participates in different communities of practice inside and outside the workplace	Participation restricted to narrowly defined job role and work station
C7	Workplace maps everyday work tasks against qualification requirements – qualification valued as adds extra skills and knowledge to immediate job requirements	Weak relationship between workplace tasks and qualifications – no recognition for skills and knowledge acquired beyond immediate work tasks
C8	Qualifications develop knowledge for progression to next Level and platform for further education	Qualifications accredit limited range of on the job competence
C9	Apprentice has planned time off the job for study and to gain wider perspective	Off the job simply a minor extension of on the job
C10	Apprentice's existing skills and knowledge recognised and valued and used as platform for new learning	Apprentices regarded as 'blank sheets' or 'empty vessels'
C11	Apprentice's progress closely monitored and involves regular constructive feedback from range of employer and provider personnel who take a holistic approach	Apprentice's progress monitored for job performance with limited feedback – provider involvement restricted to formal assessments for qualifications unrelated to job performance

Table 4: The 'Expansive Restrictive Framework'  
(Fuller and Unwin, 2010, p. 7)

Hodgson and Spours (2016) developed an alternative model (Table 5) that attempts to explain the causes underpinning restrictive or expansive policy and practice, and can be used to evaluate change at a national, or local level, and is therefore, of relevance to my study. Although neither model approaches quality from the perspective of apprentices, Fuller and Unwin’s continuum acknowledges the importance of recognising the prior experience and future aspirations of the apprentice, and does, therefore, consider some of the needs of apprentices. Hodkinson et al. (1996, p. 41) also confirmed the importance of the apprentice’s work being sufficiently varied or engaging.

Dimension	Restrictive	Expansive
1. Policy motivation	Competitive – designed to improve one’s own system in relation to economic globalisation and national policies	Collaborative – designed to develop understanding to improve one’s own system and contribute to international knowledge base
2. Governance structures and forms of exchange	Centralised and exclusive to national policy-makers	Decentralised and partnership-based with mediating layers of discussion that involve a range of stakeholders including practitioners
3. International comparison and system selection	Borrowing of ‘best practice’ from ‘successful systems’ in order to compete with a dominant global education reform system	Identification of common issues and ‘good practice’ in comparable contexts to assist with discussion of national problems and policy options
4. Historical understanding	Culture of constant policy innovation, focus on the new within a climate of ‘policy amnesia’	Understanding of national system histories through the exercise of ‘policy memory’ and reflection

*Table 5: Dimensions of restrictive and expansive policy learning in education (Hodgson and Spours, 2016, p. 515)*

To summarise, the different apprenticeship delivery models that operate within different countries affect the success of the programmes; the attendant literature highlights the importance of understanding the broader context in which vocational learning takes place.

The literature also demonstrates inconsistency in the conception and definition of apprenticeships, and subsequently, the way that quality and success are understood and measured. Ownership of the definition and conceptualisation of apprenticeships is a contested and political matter. The power currently resides with politicians and policy makers, who have devolved specific aspects of this to some employers. It allows quality to be defined in a particular way and measured using certain metrics. At present this happens in isolation from apprentices and the way that they conceive quality and success are largely ignored or unknown. It is only by understanding apprentices and their experiences and views that we can start to make any headway into improving the quality of delivery. For me, considering apprenticeships as a social construct recognises the importance of integrating the worlds of work and training, it recognises the need for cooperation between apprentice, employer and trainer, the needs of individual apprentices, and allows quality to be viewed from a range of perspectives.

#### **2.4 Absence of apprentice voice**

Hawkins' critique of apprenticeships from Volume 1 of *Technical Education* in 1959, was republished for the 50<sup>th</sup> edition in 2008 (Hawkins, 2008). By revisiting the article, the journal is emphasising the enduring difficulties in reaching a shared understanding about the purpose of apprenticeship. Hawkins criticised the lack of a clear definition, and identified wide variations in the delivery of training. He explained the effect this had on the status and impact of apprenticeships. The government has been trying to address these issues for decades, seeking the views of employers, and demanding improvements in the way that training is organised and delivered. The reissue of Hawkins' article suggests that

there is an ongoing issue of insufficient theorising within the sphere of apprenticeships, with the result being that problems are never really resolved. Throughout this prolonged period there has been no evidence of any concerted effort to ask apprentices for their views about how to improve apprenticeships, suggesting this as a basis for a new approach that could prove effective.

The only major government reports that focus on the views of apprentices are the Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Surveys (IFF, 2017a; Higton et al., 2014; Higton et al., 2013; Vivian et al., 2012). These are a series of large surveys that were first published in 2012, although they have not been conducted every year. Higton et al. (2013), for example conducted a telephone survey of 5,010 current or recent apprentices. They also included data on a further 4,519 former apprentices who finished their training between one and three years earlier. Higton et al.'s methodology, using mostly closed questions, produced data about apprentices, but did not allow an in-depth exploration of the apprentices' experiences. Most of the report's conclusions relate to improvements to benefit employers rather than apprentices; for example, increasing the employers' influence over the programme, and value for money (Higton et al., 2013, pp. 77-79). It is particularly surprising that recommendations focus on improvements for employers, because parallel surveys of employer views were run in the same years (IFF, 2017b; Colaghan and Johnson, 2014; Tu et al., 2013; Winterbotham et al., 2012). The most recent learner survey contains no recommendations at all, relegating it to little more than a data gathering exercise (IFF, 2017a).

Employment is a central feature of English apprenticeships, and in-work elements such as pay and workplace conditions that affect apprentices directly, may also influence their impressions of the overall quality of the apprenticeship. National Minimum Wage legislation means that employers are permitted to pay apprentices aged 16-18, or in the first year of their apprenticeship, a training wage below the normal wage for the job. The Apprentice National Minimum Wage is currently £3.70 per hour (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2018). Apprentices and their employers may equate this entitlement to lower pay with a lower status than other workers. A study of almost 10,000 apprentices found that the mean average pay for an apprentice is actually £6.79 per hour, although this is still significantly lower than the National Minimum Wage for those who are not apprentices (Winterbotham et al., 2014, p. 51).

Using quantitative data, Bonnal et al. (2002) compared the experience of work-based apprentices in France with a group following a school-based vocational programme. Although Bonnal et al. concluded that apprenticeship does support transition to work, they did not offer a detailed explanation for the findings. Horn (2013) used a large database of just over 10,000 individuals (Hungarian Life Course Survey) to compare apprentices with a control group, but he also focused on the benefits of the work elements for employers rather than for the apprentices.

Recognition of learner voice in relation to policy-making and changing practice has become a distinct research topic (Crowley, 2012), and since beginning this research in 2014, there is evidence of a growing interest in the apprentice voice. This shows that social processes are

not fixed, and here they draw on discourses about learner voice which are, perhaps, finally reaching apprenticeships. The National Society of Apprentices (NSoA) has grown since its launch in 2014, this suggests the emergence of a new social process of apprentice collective action. NSoA provides regular opportunities for members to discuss issues, and it is linked to the National Union of Students (NUS), giving apprentices a national platform, particularly through attendance at NUS conferences with an additional chance to influence policy (National Union of Students, 2015). Although the NSoA provides an opportunity for apprentices to share experiences and debate issues, there is little evidence that it has been effective at influencing government policy. In addition, there is evidence that many young people do not see the relevance of unions and collective action (Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2014), therefore the Society is unlikely to represent the views of all apprentices.

When the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education was launched, it established a panel of current and recent apprentices. The panel's remit is to influence and challenge the organisation's priorities and policy decisions (IfA, 2018e). Because the Institute is part of the government infrastructure there is a risk that the panel's influence may be limited to areas identified as government priorities, rather than priorities as defined by the apprentices themselves. The National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) launched an additional group, the Young Apprentice Ambassadors Network (YAAN) in 2018, to provide another way to promote the apprentice voice by supporting apprentices to share their experience with others, in particular at careers events in schools and colleges (National Apprenticeship Service, 2018). YAAN was not set up to influence the policy debate, so, although these are

all positive initiatives, none is likely to embed the apprentice voice within apprenticeship policy.

### **i. Learner voice**

Despite some interest, the concept of 'learner voice' is not as evident in vocational education and training (VET) as in other types of education. The dominant voice in VET has, for decades, been that of industry and employers (Angus 2006, p. 372), but again there are signs that the discourse is changing with challenges to the dominant voice. The introduction in September 1998 of tuition fees for undergraduates, and then subsequent increases in maximum fees in 2006, 2009 and 2010, has led to an increased interest in theorising students as paying customers, and it has become increasingly important for Higher Education to consider the opinions of learners (Canning, 2017, p. 519; Woodall et al., 2014).

Customer experience is an important measure of product quality (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), so understanding the expectations and experiences of apprentices fits with a consumerist perspective. Canning points out that students are not like other 'consumers' because, unlike a washing machine, it is not possible to return a faulty course and although transferring to another course or university may be possible, there are usually financial and time costs (Canning, 2017, p. 527). From a social perspective, apprenticeships are quite different from consumer products, because the apprentice invests time and energy in the programme and has to engage in social processes as an active partner, rather than as a consumer. The concept of active learning acknowledges learners as participants in the learning process, rather than passive recipients (Zimmerman, 2008).

Apprentices may be even further away from identifying as customers, because the way that apprenticeships are tied to employment means that apprentices have little power as consumers. Apprentices may be subject to considerable social influence from others with greater power, in particular the employer or trainer. The most recent iteration of French and Raven's Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence describes six bases of power (Raven, 2008, pp. 1-3). Apprentices could be subject to any of the six bases: informational, reward, coercion, legitimate, expertise and referent. Informational power could come from an employer or trainer who can choose to share or withhold information that the apprentice requires to do the job or complete the apprenticeship. Reward power could come from the employer's ability to promote an apprentice who behaves in a way that they approve, or to allocate better work. Coercion could come from the threat of terminating the apprenticeship, leaving the apprentice without a job or qualification. An apprentice may feel obliged to comply because of the legitimate power, coming from position or seniority, or the expertise of an employer or training provider. Finally, apprenticeships have always involved learning by emulating the actions of a 'master', so the referent power of the role model is relevant. Although it is important to view the apprenticeship as a partnership, it is not a partnership of equals. Power also affects the social and contractual relationship between employer and training provider.

An increased emphasis on the learner voice led to the introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS), used to measure quality in higher education in England. The Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) introduced the survey in 2005, and according to the



official website of the survey, its purpose is to bring about ‘real changes to the student experience’ (National Student Survey, 2018), and this has clear parallels with my study. The survey consists of a questionnaire that all HE students are invited to complete.

It is, however, difficult to know whether the increased emphasis is a genuine attempt to support and engage with learners and particularly a more diverse range of learners, or whether institutions have less altruistic motives such as attempting to attract more ‘customers’ where there is increased competition for a share of the learner market. Critics argue that the NSS provides neither an effective measure of quality, nor is it an instrument for change. They suggest that its real purpose is to manage student expectations and provide data for marketing purposes (Skea, 2017, p. 364; Sabri, 2011). Higdon (2016, p. 183) has criticised the lack of genuine learner voice or collaboration within the NSS. Others go further suggesting that by controlling the rules of engagement, routine surveys, whether in schools or HE, deliberately codify, limit, institutionalise or appropriate the student voice; giving the appearance of democracy and participation, but in reality, benefitting those with a vested interest (Canning, 2017, p. 321, Bragg, 2007, p. 344; Fielding, 2001, p. 100). Thus, one could argue that the student surveys have become instruments of ‘micro-power’, discipline and control (Foucault, 1991, pp. 210–211, 222). Power is not merely a top-down concept, it may be contested and may operate upwards (Foucault, 1991). Listening to apprentices opens up the possibility of revealing the actual complexities of the way power operates within apprenticeships, something we understand very little about at the moment.

Canning argues that bodies that purport to represent the student voice are also subject to pressures that affect their independence; for example, the National Union of Students, which has strong links with the Labour Party. When the Labour Government sought to introduce tuition fees from 1998, the NUS Executive did not oppose the policy, directly contradicting the position agreed by the NUS conference in 1995 (Canning, 2017, pp. 523-4). Universities are in the awkward position of 'serving' their students, yet profiting from policies that adversely affect students, such as the raising of fees. Many universities also conduct their own student satisfaction surveys, but power imbalances can affect results. Students may be afraid to be honest, because the people reading their comments may also be those who are marking their work (Canning, 2017, p. 525). Student views about institutions or even individual teachers are also captured through other, less formal platforms such as [www.thestudentroom.co.uk](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk), *Which? University*, and [www.ratemyprofessors.com](http://www.ratemyprofessors.com) in the USA, but these are also likely to be subject to problems such as bias (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007). Anonymous comments are not subject to accountability, but attributed comments may cause the participant to fear repercussion.

*The Code of Good Governance for English Colleges* states that governors are responsible for ensuring policies and systems are in place for capturing the student voice and recommends student representation on governing bodies (Association of Colleges, 2018). The effectiveness of the Code has been challenged following recognition that some providers were failing to make good use of the data collected:

*All too often...weaker providers either failed to listen to their learners or took too much notice of positive satisfaction surveys without checking whether their questions were analytical enough.*

Ofsted, 2013b, p. 19

Chichester College's strategy was cited by Ofsted as an example of good practice by including learners in evaluating the college's performance and establishing an environment where:

*Learners' views permeate every aspect of the college's day-to-day activity...A range of well-established initiatives, promotions and processes, often learner-led, enable learners to contribute to improving teaching, learning and assessment throughout the year.*

(Ofsted, 2015, p. 1)

Despite its weaknesses, the NSS is collecting data on a range of elements linked to the experience of HE students in a much more detailed, expansive and systematic way than the Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Surveys. A study on behalf of the Australian National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) suggested that there are similar concerns with attempts to promote learner voice in VET as there are with higher education. Although NVEAC documentation frequently refers to 'learner voice' as a means of engaging disadvantaged students, critics claimed that, in reality, the Council's interest in 'voice' had more to do with:

*Client feedback, managed participation and the commodification of training rather than any broad sense of democracy, equity or social transformation.*

Angus et al., 2013, p. 560

Despite these serious concerns, Seale (2009, p. 1000) is convinced of the potential for student voice to bring about 'meaningful transformation, participation and empowerment' in higher education; but Canning argues that in order to achieve this a much broader

definition of student voice is needed including formal and informal feedback (Canning, 2017, p. 520).

Small qualitative studies can be helpful; as mentioned previously, Vickerstaff interviewed former apprentices recalling experiences from fifty years earlier (Vickerstaff, 2003, p. 278). Her methodology made ample use of quotations and anecdotes from those who had actually been apprentices. Her study provides rich data on the experience and allows comparisons to be made with the experience of current apprentices. Vickerstaff's research evoked the work of oral historian, Studs Terkel. Terkel's anthology of stories of working people, 'Working' (Terkel, 1974) includes transcripts from dozens of individuals who were interviewed about their working lives and attitudes to work. Terkel selected his participants and carefully edited their stories, but he provides little commentary, allowing the participants' words to speak for themselves. Terkel's work suggests that the use of voice in research has the potential to challenge assumptions by presenting stories that feel universal yet intimate, surprising yet familiar, and modern yet timeless:

*I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people.*

Nora Watson, quoted in Terkel, 1974, p. xxiv

It is difficult not to draw parallels between this idea of not wishing to be confined, or defined by one's occupation, and apprentices, whose search for a calling may or may not be successful. There may be advantages to those with power in ensuring that the jobs, spirits and voices of apprentices remain small enough to be easily overlooked.

We have seen that the use of voice in research can be powerful in supporting an understanding of the experiences of individuals or groups. The power of citizen voice is often difficult to hear, but it has been felt recently in relation to the Government's handling of disasters such as Grenfell and Hillsborough, leading to calls for better recognition of the needs of individuals:

*If any good can come out of this horror, it will be a rejection of the idea that cities are predominantly a market.*

Goff, 2017

Learner voice has the potential to drive change in policy and practice; however, in reality, outputs can be affected by imbalances of power and conflicts of interest, and learner voice may become more of a marketing exercise than a driver for change. In addition, the increased interest in the learner voice that can be found within higher and further education is only just beginning to surface for apprenticeships, meaning that we know very little about the experience of undertaking an apprenticeship from the perspective of the apprentices themselves.

## **ii. Assumptions about apprentices**

The words of politicians indicate that apprenticeship policy is often rooted in rather paternalistic views of young people. An example of this is Nick Boles contribution to a House of Commons debate:

*We will also offer young people a clear choice: to earn or learn—to get a job or to go to university—or to combine earning and learning through an apprenticeship. It does young people no favours to let them start their lives in subsidised inactivity, neither earning nor learning, so we will restrict the benefits that young people receive and use the money saved...to fund 3 million high-quality apprenticeships between 2015 and 2020.*

HC Deb 4 February 2015, c. 338

There is an assumption, here, that the minister already knows what young people are like and, therefore, may think there is little point in seeking their opinions. The suggestion is that left to their own devices young people will choose ‘subsidised inactivity’ and need financial incentives to force them into apprenticeships. Arguably the options presented represent neither a genuine ‘offer’ nor ‘choice’, and policies such as ‘Earn or Learn’ or Raising the Participation Age, a policy introduced in 2015 that requires anyone under 18 to either be in education or employment with training, reinforce this idea.

The literature alerted me to what is really going on here in terms of the social processes that seek to define apprenticeships and control the narrative. Attention and real endeavour are required in order to understand these processes and what they mean. An analysis of the language of various ministers (see Section 2.3) shows their use of vivid imagery and cultural references to past, present and future. Their language brings to mind Barthes’ mythologies, particularly the article about the wrestlers whose attire and demeanour send tacit signals to spectators so they know who to cheer and who to ‘boo’ (Barthes, 2012, pp. 3-14). Even the term apprenticeship is socially constructed. It is imbued with its own mythology and meaning, with *‘deepseated cultural views and stereotypes’* impacting the views of parents and teachers (Newton et al., 2019, p. 20). These ‘myths’ remain largely unchallenged, possibly because of the lack of apprentice voice. Literature can be used to create a ‘truth’, but it can also help to question this ‘truth’. A comparison of apprenticeships throughout Europe felt it important to differentiate between the term ‘apprenticeship’, used as a theoretical concept, and the term ‘apprenticeships’, used to define what happens in practice, because the research team encountered so much confusion between the two

(Cedefop, 2018, p. 19). As the views of the various skills ministers confirm, everyone has ideas about what an apprenticeship is, or should be, and about the kinds of people who take apprenticeships. The imagery associated with apprenticeships may be based on a version of apprenticeships from the recent or distant past that is no longer relevant, or a fiction that was never real. The result is that the term “apprentice” becomes nothing but a ‘masquerade’ (Hawkins, 2008, p. 25).

The novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns that if a particular group is represented by a single story and especially by multiple versions of that single story, there is a danger that we miss the opportunity to learn about members of that group, and to learn from them (Adichie, 2009). It was essential that I approached this study with an open mind to avoid making assumptions based on my own preconceptions and bias, and to represent a range of different stories about apprentices.

## **2.5 Assumptions about apprentices and their voice**

A review of the literature has shown that there is no universal definition of an apprenticeship and no agreed view about what an apprenticeship programme should aim to achieve. Taking the position of apprenticeship as a social construct, it is easy to see how the concept has a number of interpretations and varies by country, level, model of delivery and occupation. It is also important to note that the concept is not fixed, but continues to evolve. As a result, there is no single definition of quality in the context of apprenticeship, although the dominant discourse focuses on economic and employer-centred measures. Where literature focuses on the pedagogy of apprenticeships, discourse is often limited to

the acquisition of a narrow set of competencies, rather than a broader learning experience.

My assumption was that this confusion over purpose affects the way that learners interpret their identity as apprentices and what they anticipate when they start their apprenticeship.

I also assumed that apprentices would have their own views about how quality should be conceived and measured and that their views may not match the dominant discourse.

There is little in the way of empirical evidence or theory to explain how apprentices evaluate the quality of an apprenticeship, but it seems unlikely that current measures such as completion rates or national economic growth tell us much about the quality of training or the impact on individual learners. I also assumed that a lack of literature on the delivery of apprenticeship training and from the perspective of apprentices suggests that apprentices are not seen as important stakeholders.

There are significant gaps in research with a specific focus on apprentices and their experience. Whilst confirming that there is a clear need for research in this area, the literature did not provide adequate theorisation of the apprenticeship experience or relate it to concepts such as agency, power and identity that I assumed would be relevant to the experience of apprentices. My review of the literature suggests that apprentices are largely seen as a heterogeneous group by policy makers and viewed in either utilitarian or deficit terms. Such views do not seem to recognise the current diversity in age, background, job sector and level that is apparent from the demographics of those who undertake apprenticeships. I assumed that this failure to recognise the heterogeneity of apprentices has implications for any recognition of their differing needs and for their agency and identity.



In addition, the literature provided evidence about the lack of transparency and low status of apprenticeships when compared with other types of learning. My assumption is that by involving apprentices in research and actively seeking their views, it may be possible to develop a more satisfactory understanding of apprenticeship and new ways to define, measure and improve quality and success. Paying greater attention to the apprentice voice may help those involved in apprenticeships to reach a consensus, or approach matters from a fresh perspective. The apprentice voice is not adequately represented in the literature, but I assumed that a better understanding of what apprentices want from apprenticeships, what they most value in terms of delivery and outcomes, and what they think defines quality and success, may lead to the development of a better and more inclusive definition of the purpose of apprenticeships and apprentice-centred measures of quality. The literature also provided criticisms and caveats relating to attempts to capture learner voice in higher and further education that need to be considered in order to avoid some of the problems experienced elsewhere.

To date there has been very little research on how apprentices came to be on an apprenticeship; how they make choices or negotiate roles. Literature on youth transitions suggests that young people make choices based on limited knowledge and that such choices are bounded by social and cultural considerations. The literature supports my assumption that young people considering an apprenticeship may not have enough information to make informed choices about whether to undertake an apprenticeship or may feel that they have no choice. As a result they may register for unsuitable programmes or have low or

unrealistic expectations in terms of quality. Policy decisions are still heavily rooted in theories of liberalism and rational choice; however, in reality, young people may have limited options that prevent purely rational economic choices. They may rely on a different kind of reasoning based on pragmatism, what Hodkinson et al. (1996) refer to as 'bounded rationalities'. A lack of power and social and cultural capital constrains their agency, leaving limited 'horizons for action' with fewer options (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Having less effective social or financial support may lead to greater risk adversity for some young people (Hodkinson et al., 1996, pp. 139-152). To understand how young people really make decisions, therefore, I need to understand the context of those decisions, including the underlying cultural heritage, social and personal barriers and drivers. This suggests that the apprentices' situations, beliefs and expectations will affect the way that they experience an apprenticeship, and how they evaluate success. Recognising learning as a social construct means that, in order to understand the apprentice voice, I will need to focus on the quality of their relationships, and how these contribute to the effectiveness of their learning and the quality of their experience.

As a result of the literature review, I have made a number of assumptions about the apprentice voice and how it might support new theories. I assume that apprentices will be able to describe what is positive and negative about their experiences of the apprenticeship and how these factors may impact on quality. I assume that the relationships between apprentices, training providers and employers will be significant to the way that apprentices experience the programme. I also assume that a better understanding of the experience

from the apprentices' perspective could lead to improvements in apprenticeship policy and practice. My research questions were developed in light of these assumptions.

## **2.6 The research questions**

The literature review highlighted inconsistency in the definition of apprenticeships, and the impact that this has on understanding their quality. I found a particular deficiency in literature about the experience of apprentices. I concluded that my study of the quality of apprenticeships from the perspective of the apprentices themselves could be critical in the context of an expanding and evolving area of vocational education and training. Initially I had four research questions:

RQ1: How do 16-24-year-old apprentices describe quality in the context of an apprenticeship?

RQ2: What factors do apprentices and others consider support the quality of an apprenticeship?

RQ3: What factors do apprentices and others consider hinder the quality of an apprenticeship?

RQ4: What implications and impact might the study findings have on policy and practice?

Following my initial study, I reviewed and amended my research questions. The reasons for the changes will be explained in the next chapter (see Section 3.5). The final research questions were:

RQ1: How do 16-24-year-old apprentices describe their experience of apprenticeship?

RQ2: What factors do apprentices consider support or hinder the quality and success of an apprenticeship?

RQ3: What significance does the relationship between the apprentice, employer and training provider have on the apprentices' experience?

The literature review provided information about the ways that quality is measured currently, and identified problems with the narrowly focused and employer-centric measures that are used. I designed the first research question to give primacy to the voice of the apprentices, and specifically, the words that apprentices use to describe their experiences. I have highlighted quantitative research that imposes definitions of quality or success on research participants (Higton et al., 2013; Vivian et al., 2012), and key policy documents that fail to provide a valid definition of quality (Richard, 2012). I have also criticised literature that makes links between policy or practice, and success or failure without an adequate explanation of the causal links between each element (Bonnal et al., 2002).

I chose to limit the scope of the study to apprentices up to age 24, because this is the largest group of apprentices and the literature suggests that delays in the transition from school to apprenticeship are common (Quintini and Martin, 2006, p. 13). This specific age range is also consistent with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) classification of 15-24-year-olds as recent labour market entrants (OECD, 2013, p. 132). Government data in England also reports on apprentices aged 16-18 and 19-24 separately from data on older apprentices (DBIS, 2014), and skills funding rules set different funding rules and rates for apprentices aged 16-18, 19-24 and 25+ (Skills Funding Agency, 2015). For young people, the apprenticeship is likely to represent their first experience of employment,

and their memories and experiences of school are still recent and relevant, enabling participants to make comparisons between their experiences of school and the apprenticeship. One text suggested that young apprentices are more likely to drop out of an apprenticeship than older ones, and may have different reasons for doing so, such as struggling with longer working hours, early morning starts, and “uncool” uniforms (Peacock, 2011). Older apprentices are likely to have more experience of the workplace, and a different set of expectations and needs. It was important to me that the apprentices have the opportunity to describe their experience for themselves.

The purpose of the second research question was to explore the meaning that apprentices assign to ‘quality’. The question builds on literature on the learner voice, including the comments of HM Chief Inspector that weaker providers fail to listen to their learners, or to apply their ideas about improving quality (Ofsted, 2013b, p. 19). It is important to explore links between quality and support offered, and the literature review uncovered a number of models that attempt to explain the value of particular types of intervention, or the negative effect of particular practices, but I did not feel that any had adequately theorised the value from the apprentices’ perspective. The question is phrased in a way that encourages apprentices to define quality in their own terms. It follows on from RQ1 by linking the apprentices’ experiences with their ideas about success. By collecting evidence from apprentices, I thought it would be possible to identify relevant factors and provide some insight into how they hinder success.

The premise for my second research question was that some factors are critical in determining how well apprentices learn, cope, enjoy or succeed with the programme. The literature review demonstrated that relatively little is known about factors that support or hinder quality within an apprenticeship. Data are available on apprenticeship completion rates, satisfaction rates and return on investment. Less is known about many of the less tangible factors that may affect success, including the apprentice's interpersonal skills such as communication, or employability skills such as time-management. These factors may influence how well the apprentice 'fits in' to an apprenticeship as a mode of study, or to the world of work in general, or a particular workplace setting. The apprentice's background, relationships between the apprentice, employer and training provider, the support needs and support offer from both the employer and training provider may all be important.

The concept of 'learning culture' (Hodkinson et al., 2007) is helpful in explaining how social contexts and those who operate within them such as tutors, trainers, employers, and learners affect learning opportunities and outcomes. My study was influenced by a literature of sociocultural theories, encouraging a perspective of apprenticeships as a partnership between the apprentice, employer and training provider (Hogarth et al., 2009, p. 49), and to a lesser extent, the government and wider society. It was, therefore, important to understand what the apprentices think each partner contributes to the quality of the experience, and this was the premise of my final research question.

As a policy advisor, it was important for my study to compare and contrast policy goals with stakeholder views about apprenticeships. Two common threads throughout the literature

review were the complexity of apprenticeships and frequency of policy changes, often introduced as a result of changing priorities and perceptions. I intended that the research would enable me to recommend actions that might improve quality across some or all apprenticeships. I realised that I would need to consider the extent to which any findings may be generalisable to a wider population, which will depend on the similarities between the apprentices that I interviewed and others (Denscombe, 2007, p. 43). Any recommendations would also need to be expressed in the context of a rapidly evolving national policy as well as varied local delivery models.

I considered the value of an overarching research question focusing on the relevance of literature and theory to the experience of apprentices and lack of apprentice voice in policy. The advantages of this would have been to clarify how my study builds on existing literature and theories. In the end I rejected this idea, because it was apparent from a fairly early stage of my research that there was a lack of existing theory that specifically related to the theme of apprentice experience and voice. I also realised that it would be very difficult to develop a theory around a programme that was ever changing, heterogeneous and hard to define. I chose, instead, to focus my research questions on what I could discover from my research with the apprentices themselves. Broader theory on related areas was of limited use in terms of the design and operation of my study. It was clear, therefore, that my study would not build on existing literature and theories directly, but would use them to explain the need for my research, suggest lines of enquiry and set the context for my study. The literature was important to identify gaps and shortcomings in evidence and theory, some of which my study could begin to address. I felt that any question about the relevance of

existing research and theory was better answered through interpretation of the literature than as a result of the fieldwork, although I would need to return to the literature in order to help interpret my findings.

Instead of devoting a research question to the theory, I chose to set out and explain this lack of existing evidence within the literature review section of this study. I was then able to focus on the practical application of my research and this is why I ended up with three operational research questions. I undertook my study as part of a professional doctorate, so it was important that my research questions would generate empirical evidence in order to help to bridge the gap that often exists between research, policy and practice (Hillage et al., 1998). My aim is to demonstrate that there is a case for improving policy decisions, and the quality of practice by using a range of evidence from research (Davies, 2004, p. 3) as outlined in the 1999 *Modernising Government* white paper, which emphasised a need for Government to:

*...produce policies that really deal with problems, that are forward-looking and shaped by evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures; that tackle causes not symptoms.*

Cabinet Office, 1999

In this chapter I have described my research strategy and choices that I made in selecting and critiquing the literature. I have presented a critical analysis demonstrating what is known about apprenticeship quality and the experience of apprentices. The key themes included the definition of apprenticeships and the different ways that an apprenticeship can be conceived, the definition of how quality can be measured, as well as the absence of apprentice voice. Because of the current lack of literature about the apprentice voice, I was



forced to draw on the literature from a wider range of disciplines and to consider how it could support my theorising of apprentices and apprenticeship.

In the next chapter I explain how I developed a research methodology that is congruent with the social construct position that I am taking, and the need to capture the apprentice voice in an authentic way. I discuss ethical issues relevant to the study, how the research was planned, how I conducted an initial study before commencing the main phase of my research, and how I collected, handled and analysed the qualitative data.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter sets out my methodological approach to the research. In particular, I explain how aspects of theory underpin this study, and how my own epistemology and ontology influenced my approach to research. I discuss my choice of research method and address the ethical issues that affected the research. I explain how undertaking an initial study allowed me to test my research method and instruments, and how it shaped the final research choices and questions. This chapter also describes how the research was planned, and how participants were selected and recruited. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how I collected, handled and analysed the qualitative data, including the learning process that I underwent as a researcher.

### **3.1 My research position and methodological approach**

The development of a research framework was particularly important for my study, because there were no examples of previous research to learn from or apply that had sought the views of apprentices on their experiences. The absence of an appropriate literature resulted in me drawing on a number of loosely related themes, such as youth choice and transition, and power and influence to generate the kinds of data required to answer my research questions. My research framework drew on a range of theories, models and ideas relevant to a view of learning as a social construct. This includes sociocultural theory, exploring the relationships between the partners within an apprenticeship (Fuller and Unwin, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978; Weber 1978); relativism, social constructivism and the use of

narrative voice (Hopkinson, 2010; Erben, 1999; Denzin, 1989; Terkel, 1974); and theories of power, agency, and choice (Hodkinson, 2008; Hodkinson et al., 1996).

My research position is that apprenticeships are a social construct (Billett, 2016a; Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57; Weber, 1978), and therefore, the apprentice, employer and training provider, and the relationships between them, all influence the outcome, and the experience that the apprentice has. Consequently the aim of the research is to understand quality through the lens of the apprentice. By focusing on how individual apprenticeships are constructed, my research provides a counterbalance to commonly held assumptions and discourses and, in particular, it illuminates significant gaps in our knowledge regarding apprentices' experiences. This research also begins to suggest how the apprentice experience can be integrated to improve apprenticeship outcomes. To understand the impact of the ways in which apprenticeships are socially constructed, it is vital to understand apprentices' personal journeys, backgrounds and ambitions, their notions of quality and success, and the interplay of various relationships.

To help navigate my choices, I mapped the different stages of my research. This map (Figure 1) shows all the processes at work, illustrating how research is not a linear process, but is full of interdependencies and iterations. Iteration was particularly important for the analysis of the qualitative data, because it enabled me to develop connections between different ideas. Indeed, new themes emerged through this iterative process, which provided new insights into apprenticeship theory and practice (Morse, 1994, p. 221). Only by returning multiple times to the hours of interview recordings, and pages of transcripts

and field notes that I had collected, was I able to begin to make sense of the data. I considered what apprentices had told me through a range of different lenses, allowing me to develop new insights and meaning (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). The map illustrates how I brought knowledge into the study, uncovered more during the literature review and primary research phase, and finally, began to create new knowledge as an outcome of the research.

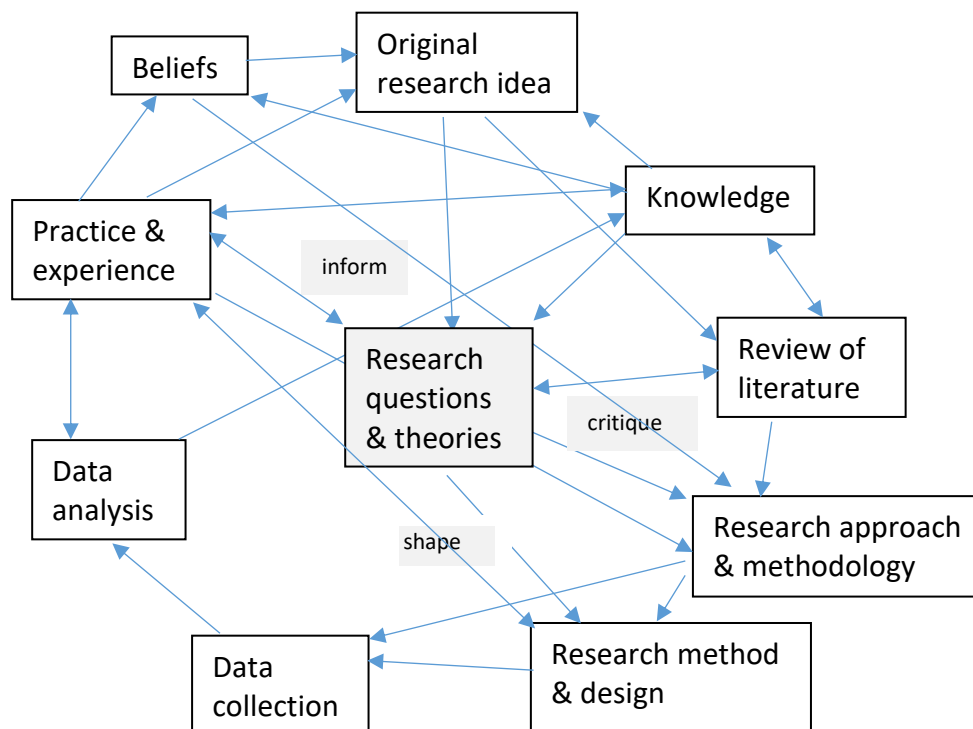


Figure 1: My iterative process for research

Mapping the research process (Figure 1) also shows that research is not objective. My own understanding of knowledge and existence, my epistemology and ontology, affects my research choices. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and existence and is particularly relevant to the question of what it means to *be* an apprentice, to exist and be labelled as such, including how apprentices understand and identify themselves. Epistemology, focusing on the nature and scope of knowledge, is particularly relevant to

understanding what it means to *do* an apprenticeship (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), to acquire work-based knowledge and skills, and navigate the path from beginner to expert. The title of this thesis, 'Is that normal?' challenges the notion of 'normality' in the context of the social construction of apprenticeships, and the futility of attempts to search for a normal apprentice experience. As there is no universal truth, my position is that the truth of any claim will depend on its context, and the way that truth is constructed by those making and hearing the claim. The research position that I have chosen to adopt is of apprenticeships as a social construct; therefore, I have tried to accept and report the views of each participant as individual and valid versions of the truth. Adopting this position has important consequences when it comes to claims about the validity of the data - I did not attempt to triangulate or verify what my subjects reported.

As a researcher, it was important for me to understand how I seek, uncover, test and present 'truth' (Fontana and Frey, 1994, pp. 372-374). I decided that using a naturalistic paradigm, describing and explaining situations in their natural context, was appropriate rather than a positivist approach, favouring methods associated with the sciences (Popper, 1968). My research sought to understand the views of a small number of apprentices on issues affecting their apprenticeship experience, using the various theories, models and ideas that underpinned my research framework. Rather than simply providing a mirror, simply reflecting back data, my job as a researcher was to act as a lens focusing on important findings, and as a prism, altering, adding to and reconfiguring data (Denzin, 1989, p. 28).

### 3.2 Research methods

My research methods needed to be consistent with my chosen methodological position, and capable of providing data to help me answer my research questions. I considered a number of methods to determine which of them would make sense in the context of this research, and how practical each would be for me to implement. I conducted a small initial study to test my choice of method, specific research instruments and the collection and interpretation of data.

My first research question focuses on individual apprentices' points of view. In particular, I anticipated discovering through an investigation of their backgrounds, how these views differ between participants, how factors such as class, race and gender affect choice, and how participants viewed apprenticeships as compared to other options that might have been available to them. For this I would need to collect some basic data, such as age, race and gender, but more important was the need to draw out other data using qualitative enquiry. My focus on the apprentices' perspective, and my theoretical position of learning as a social construct means that I am concerned with the way that apprentices interpret their situations and with the sociocultural relationships between the apprentices and their social partners (Brewer, 2000, p. 6).

Before narrowing down my choice, it was important to consider a range of methods. A positivist approach based on natural science and scientific experiment (Cohen et al., 2001, p. 8) does not match my epistemological position, and would not enable me to address my research questions. Large-scale quantitative research, for example, DBIS (2014), and Vivian

et al. (2012), can highlight statistically significant correlations, but often fails to explain the causes, or the impact on individuals. However, I used the First Statistical Release (DBIS, 2014), which includes data for all apprentices since the 2011/12 academic year, as a starting point for my enquiries to help with developing; for example, my understanding of which types of apprenticeship are most popular (Figure 2), and the national apprentice demographics.

In contrast, an ethnographic approach is well suited to gaining a deep understanding of such individual experiences (Lutz, 1981, p. 51, Willis, 2000). The literal meaning of ethnography is 'writing the people' (Mills and Morton, 2013:3), and this emphasis on better understanding individuals and their relationships fits well with the theoretical position that I have chosen, that apprenticeships are a social construct. Although the idea of learning as a social construct is not well established (Billett, 2016a; Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57), my literature review revealed very little research on the social construction of apprentices within the complex multiple sites and relationships associated with apprenticeships.

There are a number of branches of ethnography, so it was important to select the type of ethnographic research best suited to my approach. I considered approaches including participation, observation, interviews and interaction analysis that would support inductive sense-making and sociocultural phenomena (Strauss, 1987, p. 5). Ethnography has roots in anthropology and a traditional ethnographic approach would have involved immersing myself in the world of apprentices, working and training alongside the subjects of my research (Patton, 1990, pp. 202-5; Brewer, 2000, p. 6). Paul Willis used an immersive

participant method for his study of youth transition and culture: *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Willis, 2000). A similar approach could have provided the sort of data and the insights into the experience of those directly involved in apprenticeships that I required. It could also have provided data about the settings where the learning occurs and the nature of the interactions between all the participants. Initially, it would have enabled the previously unheard voices of apprentices to be captured in a compelling way. However, because of the vocational nature of apprenticeships, any observation or participation would need me to work in situ alongside apprentices and their training providers. This would have been difficult logistically, because to provide useful data about the whole experience any observation would need to take place over several weeks and in multiple locations, while I had to fit my research around my full-time employment. I was also concerned that such a participatory approach would favour an interpretation of my own experience, pretending to be an apprentice, over that of genuine apprentices.

I concluded that biographical methods such as focus groups, interviews and case studies would be most appropriate to capture the learner voice. The use of biographies acknowledges that the apprentices' lives 'can be studied, constructed, reconstructed and written about' (Denzin, 1989, p. 28). A biographical method would allow me to uncover how the apprentices made sense of their learning experiences within the environmental contexts of their work and training institution, and how these differed from the educational context they had previously experienced in school or college. I wanted to discover the apprentices' situated subjectivities, and their interpretation of their situation, position and reality. Social and oral historians, such as Studs Terkel give participants a platform on which



to tell their own stories in their own words. His selection of individuals, and his skill in interviewing and editing, makes a powerful contribution to our understanding of people's working lives:

*People are hungry for stories. It's part of our very being.*

Terkel, 2018

Additionally, focus groups involve facilitating discussions with small groups of participants. Developing this idea has a number of merits, it facilitates the gathering of a significant amount of data in each session and working with a group of participants would allow the apprentices to react to each other's ideas, potentially generating a richer understanding of the experience and socially constructed aspects of apprenticeships. Focus groups can be useful to uncover 'how people think about an issue' (Laws et al., 2003, p. 229). On one occasion during my initial research I found myself in a canteen with a group of nine apprentices who were taking a break during training. As they were happy to talk, I took the opportunity to try out a few of my interview questions. The group dynamic worked well with individual apprentices building on each other's ideas and commenting on how their experiences matched or contrasted. However, Hayes (2000, p. 395) warns that some participants can feel intimidated by the presence of others. So, despite my experience with an informal focus group, to encourage apprentices to talk freely, particularly if they wanted to discuss difficult issues such as bullying or failure, I decided not to use focus groups further.

I decided, instead, to use interviews because my review of the literature suggested that every apprenticeship is an individual experience, and I felt that this may not surface within a

group context. Interviews, if done well, are just as insightful and have the advantage of capturing a wider range of experiences than participant research. Interviews can include questions related to the apprentices' lives as social agents, their relationships with parents, peers, employers and training providers, and how they, themselves understand quality and success in the context of the apprenticeship. Consequently, I concluded that ethnographic interviews would be able to provide new insights into the way that apprenticeships are socially constructed. Interviews can be described as:

*...a conversation between interviewer and respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain information.*

Moser and Kalton, 1971, p. 271

This description emphasises the fact that an interview can be a two-way discussion. Unlike a questionnaire or observation, the interviewer can ask the participant to provide further explanation to any responses that are unclear and can summarise a point back to the participant to check understanding. Moser and Kalton's description also emphasises the need for the interview to be purposeful. Interviewing has the risk of straying off topic, so it is essential to have a clear understanding of the purpose of the interview from the outset. Another advantage of interviews is that they are very flexible, and it is possible to adapt each interview as it occurs, enabling the researcher to pick up on non-verbal clues or pursue interesting ideas (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p. 371).

Having concluded that an ethnographic approach will enable me to collect rich descriptions of the apprentices' experiences that would help me to develop an understanding of their 'lived realities' (Erben, 1999, pp. 78-80), I then had to decide which type of interview to conduct. Unstructured interviews allow freedom to work with each participant in exploring

the topic of the quality of apprenticeships, while supporting a sense of ‘co-creation’.

However, I was concerned that without structure the interviews might become like a ‘fishing expedition’ (Wiseman and Aron, 1972). Conversely, highly structured interviews can limit the ability to build a rapport with participants and would prevent the conversational style and the flexibility to pursue ideas as they form. I therefore decided to use semi-structured interviews as they would allow me to collect the qualitative data I required alongside the basic supporting data such as age and location of each apprentice, and the details about their apprenticeship.

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask each participant about any support that had been offered, or that could be offered as well as the factors that they consider influence success, which is my second research question. Initially I had in mind that support could include training materials, information, advice and guidance about choosing an apprenticeship, induction to vocational learning or the workplace, mentoring, peer support and so on. Having some structure to the interviews allowed me to cover a range of topics in a consistent way, such as whether the way the apprenticeship programme is structured, the presence of clear learning goals and a learning agreement are each significant. Having a common set of topics makes it easier to analyse and compare data from the different participants, yet still allows individual voices to emerge. The method also allows the apprentices to raise topics or factors that I might not have anticipated.

My ambition was to collect enough data about individual apprentices from in-depth interviews to help me to develop ‘pen pictures’ or vignettes of individual apprentices

(Hughes and Huby, 2004, p. 36). The use of vignettes could produce an engaging narrative through which to present data and illustrate theoretical issues (Mills and Morton, 2013, p. 28). These approaches follow the tradition of ethnographic research, respecting individual subjective experience and supporting study into the interplay of structure and agency.

Using biographic-interpretive methods (Wengraf, 2001), I sought to gain some insights to help explain how past experiences influence the present. Unlike most other types of research, biographical research focuses on an individual's experience and decision-making, rather than objective outcomes (Brockmann, 2011, p. 56). Through the asking and answering of questions, through discussion and reflection, the research also has the potential to challenge established views and began to create new meaning, both for me and for those I interviewed as part of the research (Mezirow, 1990, p. 5). Erben believes that an interpretive biographical approach supports an understanding of cultural meaning as 'lived through the narrative' (Erben, 1999, pp. 78-80). My interpretation of this is that the research uses the stories told by research participants in order to create meaning. My approach acknowledged the importance of the language people use in order to make sense of different, often contradictory experiences. I did not undertake a full discourse analysis (Jones, 2012), because this involves specific skills, and was not necessary to answer my research questions.

The idea of 'research with, not on', positions research participants as co-creators of the research, rather than research subjects (Atkins, 2013, p. 144). Traditionally students have had little input into the design and assessment of learning programmes (Bruch and

Reynolds, 2012, p. 12), and it is my belief that involving apprentices in research on apprenticeships is likely to enhance the value and ethics of my study. Practical constraints mean that within my study, co-creation was largely limited to input during the initial phase of the research, where I involved apprentices in evaluating the design of my research instruments, although they continued to influence the emergence of ideas and themes. At the end of each interview I asked the participants for feedback about the interview using the following questions:

- *Did you understand the purpose of the research and the interview?*
- *Was the fact sheet useful?*
- *How well was the session managed?*
- *Was the session too long or too short?*
- *Did you feel comfortable?*
- *Were any of the questions poorly worded or inappropriate?*
- *Did you have a chance to ask any questions or make any points?*
- *Was there anything else about the interview that could be improved?*

Rather than just providing yes/no answers, most apprentices offered brief comments on each of these questions and these helped to shape the study. Some of the apprentices said that they were confused by my questions about policy rules and funding (Appendix F, questions 18 and 19). They explained that these were not things that they really considered. As a result I changed the question on funding to focus on the concept of 'customer' (Appendix K, question 12) and explained more clearly in subsequent interviews that it was alright if they could not answer these questions. Several of the apprentices also said that I had too many questions and they were too long so I simplified the question sheet. The level of detail from the apprentices' feedback not only gave me a helpful steer for further interviews, but confirmed where the apprentices had understood the questions and really engaged with the aims of the research. Considering the apprentices' reactions to

questions about funding provided evidence to test my initial assumption that measures such as value-for-money held little meaning for the apprentices. I was conscious throughout that developing questions is not an impartial process and I was mindful of my own bias, so having the input of apprentices was helpful.

My initial study tested the research method and instruments I selected so I could be sure that my questions were suitable for young adults (16-24) engaged in employment and vocational learning at levels 2 and 3. My approach accepted that people exhibit recall bias, and will present personal and subjective narratives of events (Danermark et al., 2002). I tried to resist making judgments about individual accounts in order to respect an individual's right to tell their story their way. Achieving this delicate balance was an important practical and ethical challenge for me, especially as I had set out to describe the apprenticeship experience from the apprentices' perspectives. The use of interviews generated qualitative evidence to illustrate how young people construct and experience apprenticeships. I asked apprentices to provide their own definitions of quality and to determine whether the experience is successful or unsuccessful in their own terms. An analysis of my field notes and transcripts provided evidence to:

*...illuminate the ways students create, sustain or change their perspectives, including their perspectives on educational and/or social situations and their subjective perceptions about education and work.*

Hopkinson, 2010, p. 62

As part of the evaluation process, I also developed a set of questions for myself, and considered these at the end of every set of interviews:

- *What were the difficulties in gaining access to the relevant organisation and informants?*

- *Did the session generate the sorts of data/questions that I need to begin to answer my research questions, or generate useful ideas for further research?*
- *Was I happy with the way I managed the interviews? Did the interviewees seem comfortable and were they able to answer my questions?*
- *Was I able to record and write up useful and accurate notes of the interviews?*
- *How easy was it to analyse my findings?*
- *What do I need to do differently next time?*

The questions also provided a helpful basis for discussions with my doctoral supervisors.

Being able to adapt my research throughout the process meant that I could learn from experience, refine questions and improve the design. I was able to adjust my research plan and make changes to my research instruments. Details of these changes and the evolving process that the research underwent are included in the section on the initial study (section 3.5). Involving apprentices in this way, having rich conversations and really listening to their views has helped me to understand something of what it means to be a young person, a vocational learner, an employee and an apprentice. The methodology that I chose fitted a relativist ontology; it allowed me to acknowledge that each informant has a unique and personal experience and perspective. The limits of knowledge and differences in background mean that no two people will experience the same event in the same way. This means that it was important for me to collect evidence from a range of people and look for patterns and differences, without judging or devaluing individual experiences. Although my sample would have negligible statistical significance, I wanted to ensure that it provided a range of views, elements of which might apply to other apprentices. I wanted those I interviewed to provide their particular versions or interpretations of the truth, ‘imaginative fidelity’ (Erben, 1999, p. 84).

### **3.3 Research design**

Kvale's (1996) description of the seven stages of interview investigation provided a framework to plan my research; the stages are: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, interpreting, verifying and reporting. My research was far more iterative in practice and I found myself returning to the themes of the research many times throughout the research. Some themes became more or less important and new connections were made. This often led to new literature searches, or re-reading particular literatures from a new perspective. The initial theme of transition from school to apprenticeship became less relevant, whereas the theme of apprentice identity emerged during the study. Identifying and refining themes began during the initial research proposal and continued as part of the literature review, defining my conceptual framework, themes and research questions. For the design stage I developed a research plan, providing a structure for conducting the interviews. Having a draft plan for the main study before embarking on a much smaller initial study really helped me to understand what I was trying to achieve, and that enabled me to test out all aspects of my methodology and research instruments, knowing I could then make adjustments for my main study.

#### **i. Sampling strategy**

My focus was clearly on the apprentices, but it was important that I interview all the main partners in the apprenticeship system, including relevant personnel from the training provider and employer, in order to provide a fuller picture of the situation. My research position centred on human interactions, so it was important for me to be alert to any cultural differences within the different locations and apprenticeship sectors. It is important



to interview as many subjects as needed to answer the research questions (Kvale, 1996, p. 101). Initially I thought that 12 apprentices from two geographical regions would be a manageable number and would provide sufficient information. I eventually interviewed 33 apprentices in three different regions. I expanded my study because I was continuing to discover unique and interesting narratives.

Using an ethnographic methodology meant that it was not essential to have a statistically representative sample, but I did try to achieve a reasonable overall balance in terms of race, gender and other pertinent features. I sought, purposefully, apprentices from a range of different employment sectors, factoring in sector-specific imbalances. Health and Social Care (H&SC), Children's Care, Learning and Development and Hairdressing apprentices are predominantly female, Engineering and Construction and the Built Environment apprentices are predominantly male, whilst the other popular programmes are more balanced. Health and Social Care and Management apprentices are predominantly aged 25+, which made it more difficult to find apprentices who are recent school/college leavers.

I developed a sampling strategy, asking training providers to give me access to details about their apprentices, using learner reference numbers rather than names to limit any biases that I had. I then selected candidates that met my requirements in terms of age and apprenticeship. I provided inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Currently enrolled on an apprenticeship related to one of the 'popular' sectors in Figure 2	Age 25+
	On a level 4+ apprenticeship
	Particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent

Table 6: Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria

I asked training providers to exclude vulnerable apprentices, in order to be sure that participants would be able to make an informed choice about taking part in the research. From that selection, I further selected to ensure that I had some diversity. I focused on apprentices following the most popular level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships as these programmes represent the largest volume of apprentices. A breakdown of the most popular apprenticeships by starts is included in Figure 2. Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6 show the characteristics of the 33 apprentices that I interviewed, demonstrating a good coverage of the most popular apprenticeships. I did not interview any management apprentices, because, although it is a very popular apprenticeship sector, the lowest level of management apprenticeship is level 4, and therefore outside of the scope for my study.

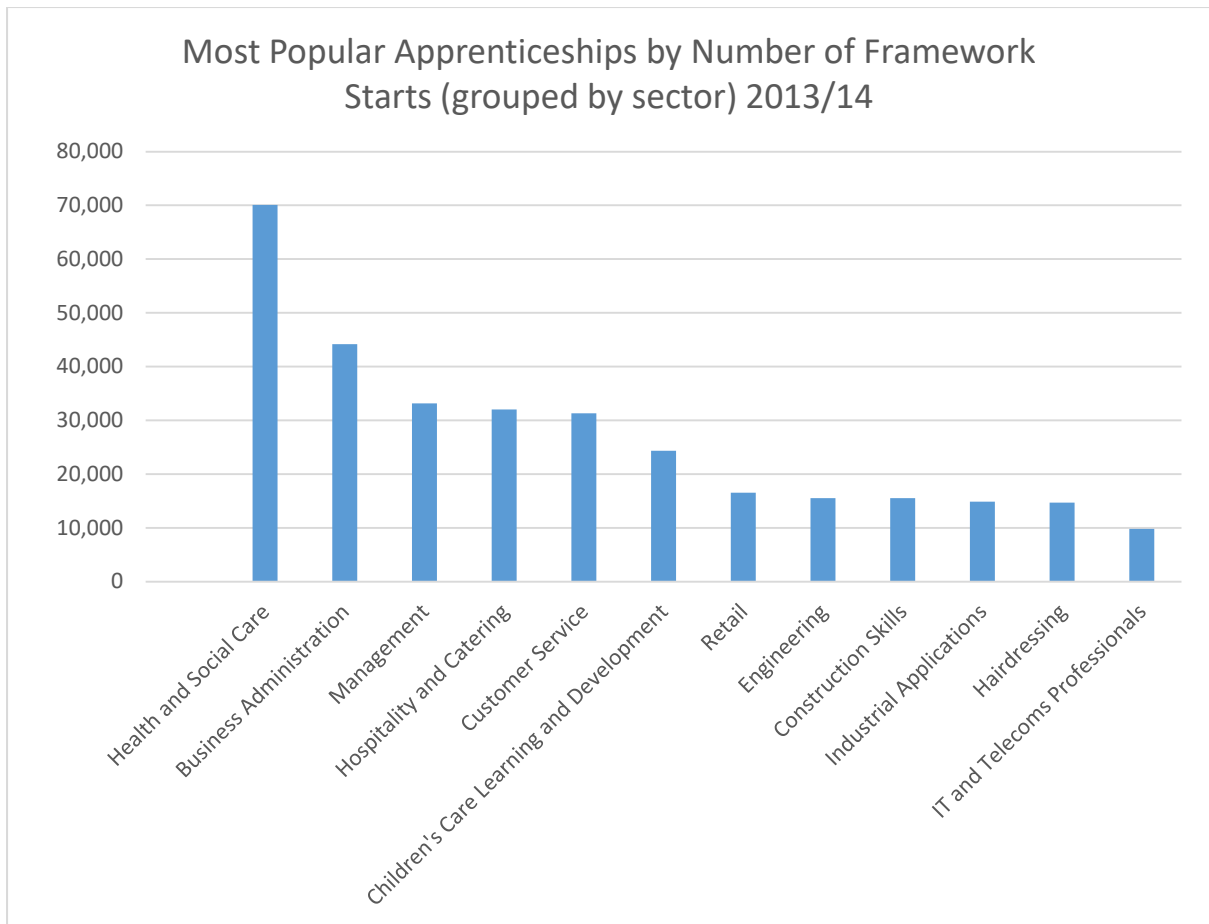


Figure 2: Most Popular Apprenticeships

(DBIS, 2014)

Some elements of apprenticeship learning are delivered off-the-job; for example, by independent training providers or further education colleges. For practical reasons, and to allow sufficient depth within my case studies, initially I focused on two private training providers and one further education college. Once I had a plan for the main phase of my research, I was able to develop a plan for the initial study. Before commencing any fieldwork, I considered ethical issues.

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

Any research involves ethical issues, but because I wanted to provide an authentic representation of the apprentice voice there were specific ethical considerations for my study. As a civil servant who has never been an apprentice, I was concerned about my right to make any knowledge claims about the experience of apprentices. It was essential to really listen to apprentices and respect the authenticity of their voices, but it was also important to analyse their comments carefully and critically in order to support a clear case for change. My initial study demonstrated that some of my questions evoked emotions and highlighted the complexity of individual lives, but they also raised important questions about individual notions of success, and the importance of the relationship and power balance between the apprentice, employer and training provider (Raven, 2008). I wanted my research to be informative and ethical, what Erben (1998) refers to as 'educative'. I also wanted to be fair to the apprentices, training providers and other businesses who had all consented to take part. I sought to learn about their contributions to the experience of apprentices, but I was not looking to apportion blame. My aim was to show respect to all participants:

*What I bring to the interview is respect. The person recognizes that you respect them because you're listening. Because you're listening, they feel good about talking to you.*

Terkel, 2008, p. 176

Before conducting any fieldwork, I secured ethical approval from the Open University's Ethics Committee. This involved setting out a detailed proposal for my research, describing the purpose of my research, the methods that I intended to use. I identified what were likely to be the main ethical issues and how I planned to approach them. Informed consent

is essential to any research involving human participants and I developed an information sheet about the research, which I gave to all participants (Appendix E). The reverse of the sheet contained a consent form for participants to confirm that they agreed to participate and understood how I planned to manage and use the data that they provided. The sheet explained how data would be stored and anonymised, how all data would eventually be destroyed and how any participant could withdraw their consent at any time until the point where I began my final write up. I provided contact details for me and my main supervisor, so participants could check my status or discuss any concerns.

All apprentices were over 16 years old and I discussed safeguarding issues with the training providers. I asked them to exclude any apprentices who they felt may have been particularly vulnerable from my sample. Although I wanted the apprentices to share experiences with me, and my research was not about deeply personal or sensitive matters, for some the questions may relate to uncomfortable events such as feeling like a failure at school. I made it clear during the interview that participants could stop the interview at any time, they could refuse to answer any question, or they could ask for a particular response or the whole interview to be deleted and not used. Using this approach, and checking with each apprentice, meant that I was confident that all the apprentices that I interviewed were able to provide informed consent to participating in the research. All participants were happy to sign a copy of the consent form and were left with a copy of the information sheet so they could refer to it at any time.

I have used pseudonyms for all individuals and organisations that participated in this study. Ensuring anonymity was essential to encourage all participants to speak freely about their views and experiences. I was also careful to avoid sharing any information about what one participant had told me with any other participant. It was particularly important that apprentices felt able to be critical of their employer or training provider without fear of repercussions. I gave each individual participant a pseudonym that could not be traced back to them, and I allocated pseudonyms to all the businesses that took part. To find suitable pseudonyms that were sensitive to different cultures, I asked each participant to help choose a pseudonym, suggesting that the name be drawn from the name of a family member or friend who broadly reflected their own gender, age and ethnicity. Where the apprentice did not wish to suggest a pseudonym, I chose one for them.

Even after obtaining consent from the Ethics Committee I continued to review ethical dilemmas at all stages throughout my research project. It became apparent during my initial study that there were a number of ethical issues related to my dual status as government policy official and independent postgraduate researcher. I thought carefully about how to handle the 'insider/outsider' issues that affected my research, discussing this with my supervisors. I had to be careful with the use of 'grey' literature to ensure that any unpublished material that I used was not restricted or sensitive. I realised that I would need to criticise government policies, but to protect my employment and my critical role as a researcher, I tried to ensure that any criticism was carefully balanced, supported by evidence, and fair.

One of the most challenging issues for me turned out to be how to present myself to the research participants, and how to ensure that I maintained my status as researcher, rather than policy official. Initially I wanted to be completely transparent, and was very clear about my dual status as researcher and government official. However, my first interview with an apprentice challenged this approach, and led me to re-evaluate the way that I presented myself to participants, indicating that the research was also a social process. Sara asked me whether she was being paid the right salary, or receiving enough training; and it was tempting to explain all the entitlements, but I had to remember that I was conducting the interviews as a researcher, not a government official. Sharing knowledge from my own experience could have influenced the rest of the interview and undermined the impartiality of the research process. The purpose of the interview was to capture Sara's views, not to change them. Sara's employers, Alan and Jo, sought similar reassurance from me that they were doing right by Sara. They wanted to be good employers, and simply by asking detailed questions, I had made them understand how reliant on the training provider they had been. I realised that being honest about my position as a policy expert had affected the expectations of participants. Even though I explained that the research was separate to my employment it seemed likely that my job role had influenced responses by exerting legitimate or expert power over the apprentices (Raven, 2008). This could have made participants feel obliged to take part, or to be less critical of the apprenticeship programme and less open about their own experiences than they might otherwise have been. I was concerned that revealing the nature of my employment affected the power balance and overall effectiveness of the interviews. In order to try to get more authentic and balanced views, for later interviews, I told interviewees only that I was a research student and did not

raise any details of my job unless I was asked. I believe that this did lead to more candid responses from participants, but this lack of transparency continued to cause me some internal ethical challenges. Ultimately, I reminded myself that I was undertaking the study as an independent researcher, and that the aim of the research was to understand more clearly the experiences of apprentices and their perceptions of its quality.

There were other unintended consequences of the research process; when I re-interviewed Sara, she explained that simply participating in the research had caused both her and her employers to consider and re-evaluate their situations and relationships, so they were also adapting their social processes. This was not something that I had foreseen, and I could not have avoided it, but it is important to note that the interview process has the power to surface issues just by asking participants to consider their responses to questions, and perhaps to see things in a new way.

Although I had asked training providers who helped me to arrange the interviews to share my fact sheet with participants in advance, one group of apprentices had not been given notice of my visit. I tried to ensure that they had not been coerced into participating, and gave them the opportunity to not take part, but it would have been better for them, and more ethical, had they had warning. One of the apprentices that participated informed me that she had dyslexia and said that she would have liked to have seen the questions in advance to allow her to gather her thoughts. Although this was a valid point, I decided not to provide questions in advance, because I genuinely did not want interviewees to have to spend any time preparing and I wanted spontaneous answers; I was able to rephrase or



expand questions if needed, and, as the interviews are semi-structured, there will always be additional and sometimes unpredictable lines of enquiry. I explained this to the apprentice and she seemed reassured and was happy to proceed.

### **3.5 The initial study**

I conducted an initial study to test my research methodology, and to trial specific research instruments ahead of the main phase of the fieldwork. I used the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers, an online database, to identify training providers in my local area, then looked at their websites to find those offering the most popular types of apprenticeships. I made a list of potential organisations and contacted them by telephone to explain that I was researching the apprenticeship experience and wanted to conduct some interviews. The third organisation that I contacted agreed to consider my request and I arranged an interview with a senior assessor in September 2015. I sent confirmation by e-mail including my background information sheet (Appendix E). This training provider and its network, became the focus for my initial study, which acted as a small-scale version of my main study.

The first interview gave me the opportunity to explain my research to the assessor and to find out what she felt were the main factors that supported apprentices, or acted as a barrier. She described all the things that the training provider does to support its apprentices. During the interview I asked the assessor to help me identify employers and apprentices to participate in my initial study. I explained my selection criteria (Table 6). The assessor was happy to provide introductions to two employers and four apprentices. Table 7 and Table 8 detail the four apprentices and other participants interviewed for the initial

study. All these interviews took place at the employers' or training providers' premises and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Prior to the initial study, I developed a set of questions to use during my interviews. Using a semi-structured format for the interviews had three main advantages: firstly, I wanted to gather specific data from each apprentice such as age and the specific apprenticeship that they were on, to ensure a reasonable diversity and to facilitate comparisons during the analysis. Secondly, I wanted to make sure that I asked all apprentices about the same topics and having some structure helped me to cover these in a logical order. Finally, I wanted to avoid using too rigid a structure, because it was important that the apprentices were able to express themselves, and for additional topics to emerge, even if I had not foreseen them. The need for some factual data meant that my research instruments began with closed questions, but moved to more open questions. Open questions formed the main part of the research instrument and were designed to capture the apprentice's own story of how they came to be on an apprenticeship, experiences of that apprenticeship and thoughts about any changes that they would like to see. I adapted the questions I used for apprentices for employers and training provider staff. The research instruments/interview templates that I used for my initial study are included at Appendices F-H.

Apprentice	Employer	Gender	Age	Apprenticeship	Training Provider	Interview Date	Location
Sara	ALR Property Management	F	22	Level 3 Business Administration	VTM Training	Sep-15	South East
Jade	Cherubs	F	19	Level 2 Children & Young People's Workforce	VTM Training	Oct-15	South East
Keeley	Cherubs	F	17	Level 2 Children & Young People's Workforce	VTM Training	Oct-15	South East
Elise	Cherubs	F	19	Level 2 Children & Young People's Workforce	VTM Training	Oct-15	South East

Table 7: Initial Study – Interviews with Apprentices

The names of all individuals and organisations have been changed

Training provider	Organisation	Business Type	Job roles	Interview Date	Location
Training Provider staff: Connie and Gwen	VTM Training	Training Provider	Marketing manager and Senior Assessor	Sep-15	South East
Employer/ manager: Alan and Jo	ALR Property Management	Property Management	Owners/managers	Sep-15	South East
Employer/ manager: Mags	Cherubs	Children's nursery	Owner/Manager	Oct 15	South East

Table 8: Initial Study – Interviews with Training Providers and Employers

The names of all individuals and organisations have been changed

I was able to test that the research questions generated sufficient data, and the right kind of data, and most importantly, to check my interviewing skills. The initial study gave me the opportunity to revise my research questions, protocols and plans in the light of my experience, and to identify any new emerging themes before commencing my main study. As expected, the initial study highlighted some weaknesses in my methods, which I was able to address before commencing the main phase of my research. In my initial study, for example, when I went to interview the senior assessor from the training provider, I found that she had invited a colleague, the marketing manager to join the interview. It may simply be the case that the original interviewee felt more at ease with a familiar face present, and I

did not feel able to object. In fact, the interview provided some helpful data and the other interviewee did bring additional insights. Although interviewing the two together was actually helpful, it indicated that I had not been sufficiently clear that this was a formal request to participate in an academic research project, and I had to some extent, lost control of the interview. This was an important lesson and I took account of this, being more precise when recruiting participants and setting up interviews during the main phase of my research.

To assist with the analysis of data I tabulated the responses using emerging themes: Appendix I provides an example from the initial study. I developed a protocol for codifying data as the research progressed, adding new themes as they emerged. Additional spreadsheets allowed me to sort the data in different ways; an example is included (Appendix J). I made a number of changes to my research questions as a result of my initial study. Initially I assumed that the words 'quality' and 'success' were almost interchangeable, and during the initial study I asked the apprentices about what they thought made a 'quality apprenticeship' (Appendix F, interview question 6). I noticed that responses to this question were quite hypothetical and generally phrased in the third person. I began to see a pattern; use of the word 'quality' and the way I had structured my question seemed to cause some apprentices to simply recite the benefits of apprenticeships to me, using words that I would associate with marketing, rather than creating their own definitions and judgments about quality. It may also be relevant that during my initial study I told participants that, as well as a researcher, I was also a policy advisor. Some participants

referred to the quality of generic apprenticeships, rather than the specific apprenticeship programme that they were taking; for example:

*A quality apprenticeship includes lots of training and really stretches the apprentice.*  
Sara (22), level 3 business administration apprentice

*A quality apprenticeship is about the relevance of the training to the job. The two have to match or it's pointless really.*  
Elise (19), level 2 children & young people's workforce apprentice

I experimented by substituting the word 'quality' with 'successful' in order to see if this generated different reactions and found that the two words had quite distinct meanings for participants. Responses to the new question confirmed that 'quality' was seen as an objective and measurable concept, while 'success' had a broader and more personal meaning for the apprentices and elicited more reflective responses:

*Success for me will be the chance to apply for a promotion when I finish [the apprenticeship].*  
Rick (22), level 3 business administration apprentice

*If I can look back and see that this apprenticeship was the start of a successful career then I will know it has been a success.*  
Yasmin (21), level 3 customer service apprentice

I reviewed my main research questions in the light of this learning. The original questions had been:

RQ1: How do 16-24-year-old apprentices describe quality in the context of an apprenticeship?

RQ2: What factors do apprentices and others consider support the quality of an apprenticeship?

RQ3: What factors do apprentices and others consider hinder the quality of an apprenticeship?

RQ4: What implications and impact might the study findings have on policy and practice?

I found that my research questions had insufficient focus on the apprenticeship experience.

Eventually I replaced RQ1 with

*How do 16-24-year-old apprentices describe their experience of apprenticeship?*

Initially I had separate research questions, RQ2 and RQ3, on the factors that support quality and those that hinder it (RQ2 and RQ3). I had assumed that the two questions would produce distinct responses; however, the initial study showed that in most cases the two were closely related, often simply being the presence or absence of the same factors. One example was having a mentor, the presence of which was cited as a factor related to a successful apprenticeship, just as the absence of a mentor was cited as factor that hindered success. As a result, I decided to merge my second and third research questions to focus on success rather than quality and to cover factors that support and hinder it. I also decided to narrow the focus of question 2 by removing references to each of the main social partners in order to really concentrate on the apprentices. I changed the focus to 'success' in order to include a more subjective theorisation of quality, so the question became:

*RQ2: What factors do apprentices consider support or hinder the quality or success of an apprenticeship?*

It also turned out that in practice RQ4 had not worked as a research question and I would be addressing the implications of the study as part of the Conclusions chapter in any case. I substituted the question with a new one focusing on the social aspects of the

apprenticeship, because this had become the theoretical position that I had chosen to adopt, of apprenticeships being socially constructed. The final questions for the main study were, therefore:

RQ1: How do 16-24-year-old apprentices describe their experience of apprenticeship?

RQ2: What factors do apprentices consider support or hinder the quality and success of an apprenticeship?

RQ3: What significance does the relationship between the apprentice, employer and training provider have on the apprentices' experience?

I made substantial changes to my research instruments as a result of my experiences during the initial study, and the changes to my research questions. The process of data analysis highlighted weaknesses in some of my interview questions; the final column of Appendix J shows some of these. Changes reflected the shift in focus from transitions, to the overall apprenticeship experience. Some of the specific questions from the initial study did not elicit the depth of data that I wanted; for example, my questions on learning and support were not sufficiently well-defined for the apprentices (Annex F), and I frequently needed to provide an explanation of what I meant by learning and support as a follow-up. This meant that I had misjudged the questions, but even more significant was the danger that my follow-up questions were leading the participants to provide the sort of answers that I was expecting, rather than encouraging them to use their own interpretation. An example is question 15 (Appendix F) which asked, *'How do you think the rest of the team see you?'* Several of the apprentices were a little flustered by this question and on one occasion I followed it up with, *'Do they see you as "just the apprentice?"'* When I reviewed the recording of the interview it was obvious that this was a very leading follow-up question.

It was only after my initial study that I found literature suggesting that since the introduction and increase in degree tuition fees, undergraduates are more likely to see themselves as 'customers' (Woodall et al., 2014). Literature suggested that evidence for this includes growing numbers of complaints by students, the growing importance of league tables and destination/future earnings data for universities and specific degrees. I added a question about the 'contractual' relationship between the apprentice and the training provider to establish whether apprentices had such views (question 12, Appendix K).

As a result of the feedback that I collected from participants during the initial study, I simplified the language within my research instruments. Two participants commented that they did not understand the difference between 'on-the-job' and 'off-the-job training' (question 4, Appendix F), so I changed this to 'training at work and college' (question 3, Appendix K). Similarly, 'support' (question 16, Appendix F) became 'help' in the later template (question 11, Appendix K). Following analysis of data from the initial study, I decided to split some of the questions for the main study to allow more accurate and useful coding of the responses (Appendices I-J).

From listening back to recordings of interviews, I concluded that the number of questions and the detail that I had included on my original templates (Appendices F-H) were distracting me and preventing me from fully engaging with the apprentices, by hindering my ability to listen actively. Active listening involves focusing on the subject of the interview, really listening to what is being said, and taking in any non-verbal clues such as shoulder



shrugs, as well as building empathy (McNaughton and Vostal, 2010). I realised that in my rush to get to the next question on my list, I had cut one of the apprentices off in the middle of a description of an event that was not only very important to her, but was also potentially very relevant to my research. By sticking to my initial set questions, I had missed the importance and relevance of her response. As I became more experienced at interviewing, I found that I needed just a few key words to remind me about the topics that I wanted to cover. Appendix K is the final version of my interview question template and demonstrates the evolution of the way that I conducted interviews from my initial study to the main phase of my research. Using this template enabled me to use my active listening skills more effectively. This helped the interviews feel more relaxed, and really improved my skills as an interviewer. As my confidence as a researcher grew the interviews became more like conversations, and the duration of the interviews increased to incorporate more in-depth discussion. Early interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, later ones were approximately 75 minutes.

I had not planned to include data from my initial study within my findings, because the main purpose of the initial study had been to test my methodology and research instruments. In this case, however; the initial study generated such rich data that I felt should be treated as a corpus with my main study. With some types of research it would be inappropriate to use data from the initial study, however; my use of an ethnographic approach meant that I did not plan to conduct any quantitative analysis. I was not relying on the questions being identical as I would not be using statistical tools for analysis. As a result I was able to make small changes to my research questions and still use data from the initial study. Including

data from the initial study also gave me an opportunity to re-interview three of the four apprentices who had taken part in the initial study a year later when they had finished, and were able to reflect on their experience. I felt that having a longitudinal element to my research would provide a fuller picture of the apprenticeship. In particular, there was evidence of 'maturation both in terms of occupational expertise and personal development' (Fuller and Unwin, 2009, p. 410), and to discover how the apprentices' experiences changed as they moved between different stages of their learning. I asked the apprentices about their experiences within the workplace and with the training provider, therefore my research included both spatial and temporal dimension, which is often a feature of ethnographic research.

### **3.6 The main study**

The main fieldwork took place between February 2016 and June 2017. I started by recruiting training providers, but this time I focused on five training providers in three areas of England, the South East, the South West and the North, giving me a good spread across country. Two of the training providers were FE colleges, and the other three were private training companies. The 33 apprentices that I interviewed worked for eleven different employers, representing different sized organisations and different sectors.

Once again, I asked the training providers to help me to identify my sample of apprentices, and I used the same inclusion and exclusion criterion as before (Table 6). I was more rigorous with the sampling for the main study, and gave really clear directions to the training providers, in order to limit their ability to influence the sample. Once I had a list of

all the apprentices that met my criteria, I was able to select a random sample. All of the selected apprentices were undertaking a level 2 or level 3 apprenticeship in one of nine different occupations as shown in Table 10.

The rest of this chapter explains all aspects of the fieldwork, data analysis and interpretation of findings. Although most of the stages involved several iterations so the process was not linear, I have summarised each of the stages in Table 9.

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Data and materials (examples)</b>	<b>Process</b>
Data collection and management September 2015-June 2017	Interview schedule (Table 10) Research instruments/question templates (Appendix K) Audio files Field notes (Appendix L)	Raw data and materials were collected during the pilot and main studies. Interviews were audio recorded and contemporaneous field notes were taken.
Organising and preparing data September 2015-August 2017	Transcriptions of interviews Log of all files, transcripts and field notes	Audio files were transcribed in full Key words and ideas were bookmarked using highlighter tools Wherever possible, transcripts were checked for accuracy and completeness with apprentices
Coding and describing data November 2015-December 2017	Code schemes Excel spreadsheets (Appendices I and J)	Excel spreadsheets were used to tabulate the data. Data was simplified, sorted and coded in order to enable comparisons and analysis. Responses were isolated and clustered by research question and theme
Identifying, conceptualising and classifying themes December 2015-February 2018	Mind maps (Appendix M and N)	Coded data was searched to identify similarities and differences, to look for any areas that could be generalised

		Themes were identified and clarified Links between theory and findings were mapped. Whiteboards allowed me to experiment with various analytical tools
Connecting and synthesising data April 2016-June 2018	Wordclouds (Appendix O)	Key themes were selected and key words attached to each to help mine the data for examples that could support findings further connections were made between literature and findings
Interpreting, creating meaning, explaining July 2016-September 2018	Interpretation tools (Appendices M, N and O) Vignettes (Chapters 4 and 5)	Emerging findings were scrutinised and considered in more detail in order to make sense of them and consider how best to explain and present them. Earlier interpretations were revisited Vignettes were created to help explain the apprentices' experiences

Table 9: Summary of the stages of data collection and analysis

**i. Data collection and management**

My main data collection was through interviews with apprentices, their managers or employers, and training provider staff. I kept careful records of my plans and produced a schedule for all my interviews to manage my time and that of all the participants. As the training providers were the main gatekeepers, allowing me access to other participants, I checked schedules carefully with them at the planning phase. Schedules were confirmed prior to my arrival, and again as soon as I was on site. On most occasions I was able to interview up to five individuals a day, although on a few occasions, I had to adjust my plans,

because apprentices were absent, or initial information had been incorrect. Table 10 provides a summary of all the interviews that were part of this study.

Date	Training Provider staff	Apprentices	Apprenticeship and level	Employers
Sept-Oct 2015	VTM Training, South East  <b>Connie Gwen</b>	<b>Sara</b>	business administration, level 3	ALR Property Management  <b>Alan Jo</b>
		<b>Jade Keeley Elise</b>	children & young people's workforce, level 2	Cherubs  <b>Mags</b>
		<b>Angel</b>	retail, level 2	Branches  <b>Christophe</b>
<b>Jon</b>	Woodland Crafts  <b>Kevin</b>			
<b>Sasha Djimon</b>	TXT electrical			
July 2016	Eastfield College, South East	<b>Yasmin</b>	customer service, level 3	ServCo  <b>Frank</b>
		<b>Mo Nick Scot Deepak</b>	information technology, level 3	
		<b>Georgina Parveen</b>	healthcare support, level 3	QC Trust
Nov 2016	VTM Training, South East	<b>Sara</b>	business administration level 3	ALR Property Management  <b>Alan</b>
		<b>Kyla</b>	children & young people's workforce level 2	Cherubs  <b>Mags</b>
		<b>Jade Elise</b>	children & young people's workforce level 3	
Dec 2016	<b>Match Training, South West</b>	<b>Amy Henry Rubina Trinny Will</b>	business administration, level 2	Gables Healthcare  <b>Keith</b>

Date	Training Provider staff	Apprentices	Apprenticeship and level	Employers
		<b>Char</b> <b>Rick</b> <b>Alfie</b>	business administration, level 3	
Jan 2017	Instep College, North  <b>Jo-Beth</b> <b>Mary</b>	<b>Lottie</b> <b>Chloe</b>	marketing, level 3	Instep College  <b>Jo-Beth</b> <b>Mary</b>
		<b>Max</b> <b>Lucy</b>	customer service, level 2	
June 2017	JT Skills, North	<b>Kieran</b> <b>Josh</b>	construction building, level 2	Hodpers
		<b>Rob</b>	construction building, level 3	
		<b>Kristen</b> <b>Carly</b>	licensed hospitality, level 3	Cambrian Star

Table 10: Interview Schedule

The names of all individuals and organisations have been changed  
 Key - Bold typeface indicates all participants

Each of the apprentices was registered with one of five training providers as shown in Table 10. My sample included two larger employers (ServeCo and Gables). I discovered a problem with the data from one of the training providers which meant that two of the apprentices that I had arranged to interview were actually over 24 years old. I had started the interviews when I discovered this and both were very keen to take part so I continued with the interviews. I listened to the recordings of their interviews to see if they included any additional insights that provided a contrast with the younger apprentices, but in the end, I took the decision to exclude their data from the analysis, and they are not within the 33 apprentices within this study. In three cases, selected apprentices were absent on the day of the interview, but I was able to find an alternative with a similar profile for each.

One training provider gave me access to a number of artefacts such as induction materials, marketing brochures, data and evidence of the apprentices' work. An analysis of the artefacts provided evidence about what training providers think apprentices and employers

need to know or will be interested in, and they provided insights into the particular values that the provider wished to present to the outside world. Although these were interesting, I decided that this material did not help to answer my research questions and I have not included it in my analysis.

*a. The apprentices*

Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6 show the characteristics of the apprentices that participated in this study. The apprentices ranged from just three months into the apprenticeship to those near completion. Four of the apprentices had previously undertaken at least one other apprenticeship and the experience of multiple apprenticeships provided valuable data as the apprentices were able to compare the quality of two programmes and suggest possible reasons for the differences.

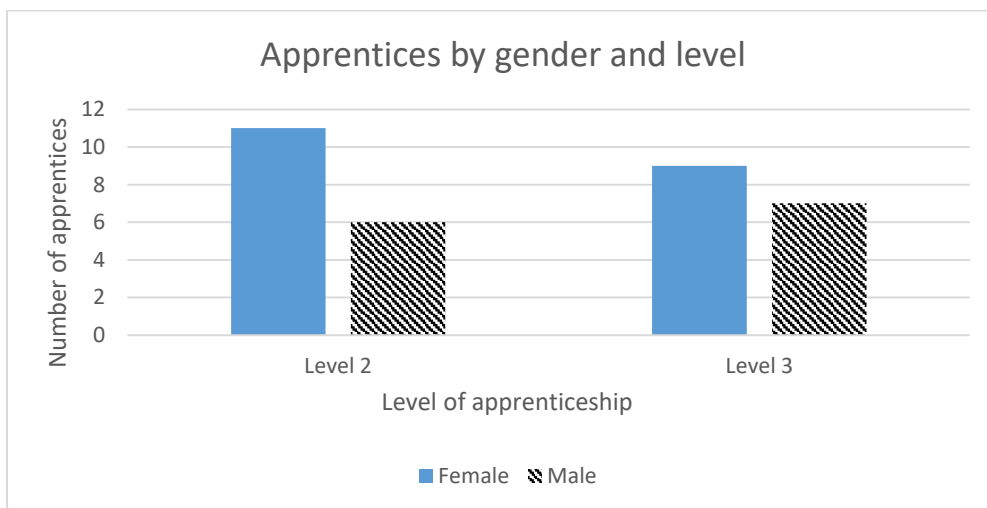


Figure 3: Characteristics of apprentices interviewed – by gender/level

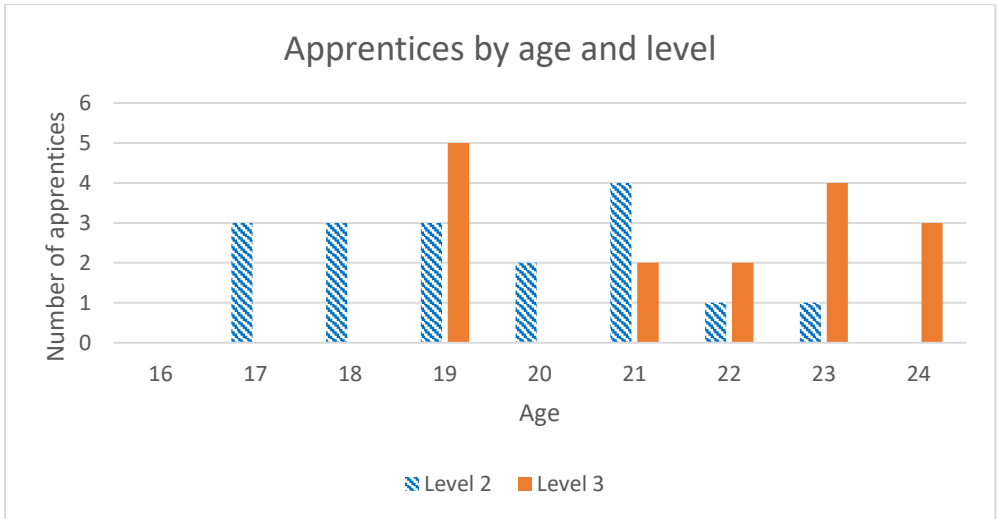


Figure 4: Characteristics of apprentices interviewed – by age/level

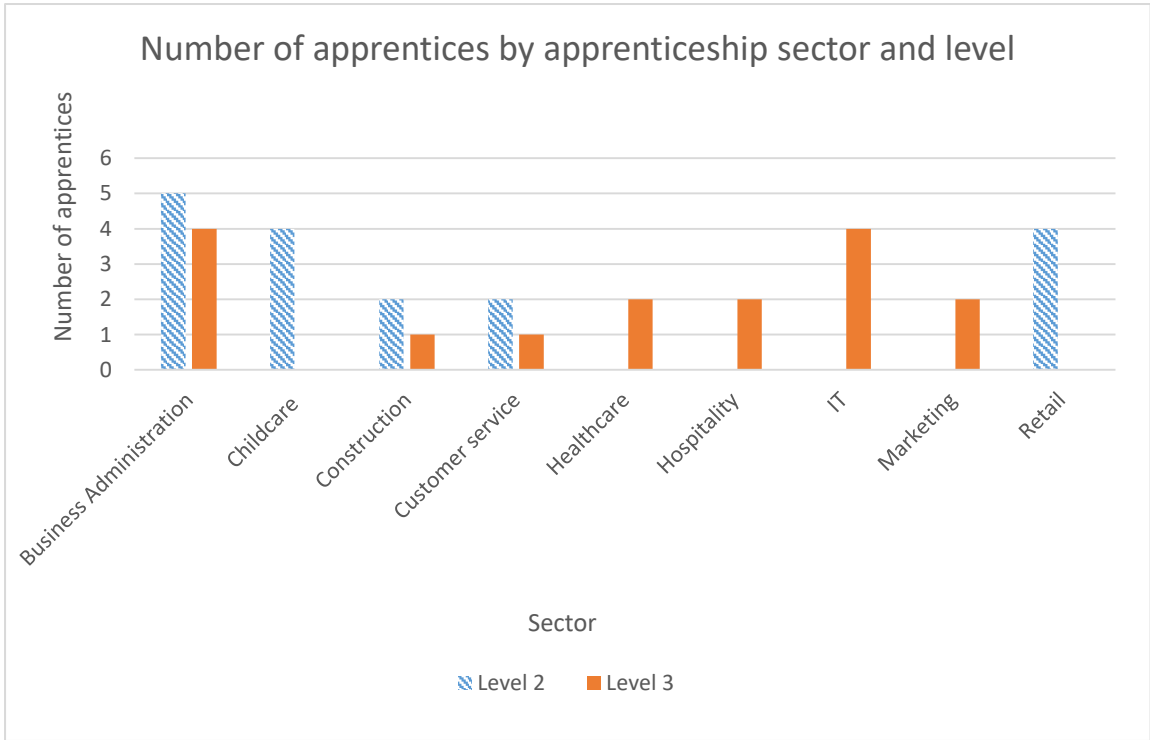


Figure 5: Characteristics of apprentices interviewed – by sector/level



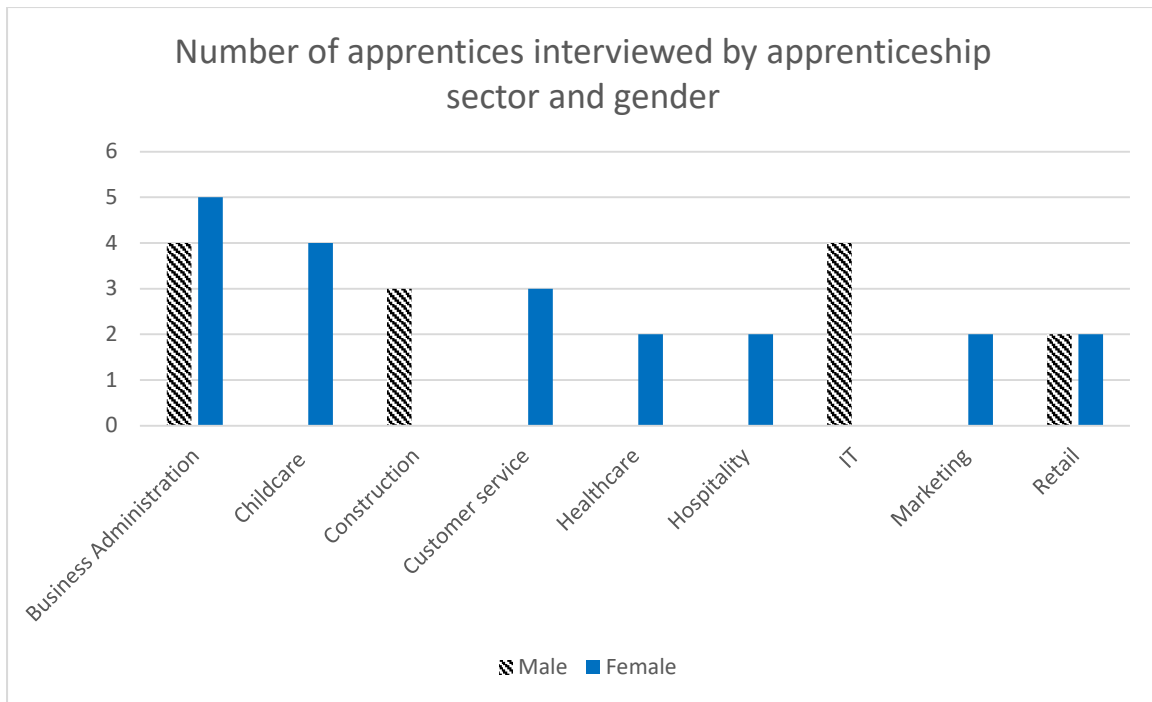


Figure 6: Characteristics of apprentices interviewed – by gender/sector

### b. Interviewing

All participants gave consent for their interviews to be audio recorded. The first few minutes of each interview were spent discussing the project, checking consent, answering questions and explaining how I would protect the confidentiality of apprentices and others. The healthcare apprentices had specific concerns about protecting the dignity of the residents at the hospice where they worked, so we agreed a protocol that included not using the names of any residents, or details about their care. All participants had limited time, so it was important to negotiate access and also identify a suitable location where participants and I would be and feel safe and comfortable. I interviewed participants either at the training provider’s premises or at their place of work. This allowed participants to be in a familiar and safe space, minimising disruption for them. Most of the sites that I visited

had offices, meeting rooms or other spaces that were sufficiently private and comfortable to be suitable for my interviews.

Interviewing the childcare apprentices was challenging logistically, because I had not appreciated the difficulties of securing time for them to be 'off duty'. I could not interview the childcare apprentices in a private room, because they could not be away from the children in their charge. As I had arranged a day at the nursery, I was able to ask the apprentices about their experiences as they carried out their work. This was the closest that I got to ethnographic participant research, because I experienced some of the pressure that these apprentices were subject to, but the situation was not ideal. Although I managed to get some good data from all three apprentices, they were often distracted by the young children, and they may have been prevented from giving a considered response and the lack of privacy may have inhibited them.

The process of analysis started during each interview when I made brief field notes on my question sheets. I jotted down any words, phrases or ideas that seemed particularly interesting or pertinent to my research questions. I also noted any points that I wanted to follow up during the interview. These notes were brief, usually a word or two, because I did not want to be distracted from listening to what the apprentices were saying. Immediately after each interview was completed I added to my field notes, jotting down any immediate reflections such as my overall impressions of the way that each apprentice described his or her experience, and my initial thoughts about the meaning of particular words, phrases or examples used by the participants. This was particularly important where I was conducting

multiple interviews during the day and helped me to ensure that I captured and used any learning points from each interview. All field notes were scanned and saved: an example is included as Appendix L. Pertinent points from my field notes were then used to inform any changes to my research instruments as well as to help with the later stages of analysing of the data.

## **ii. Organising and preparing data**

Transcribing is the fourth stage of Kvale's model and is essential to the organisation and preparation of data for analysis. For practical reasons, I transcribed each of the interviews as soon as possible, including writing up any relevant comments from the field notes that I had taken. I used bookmarks and highlighted the most important points and interesting quotations so I could find them easily when needed. Transcribing throughout the process meant that I was able to learn from my experience, and use that knowledge to improve the next set of interviews. Transcribing was a time-consuming process, but listening to the recordings myself, rather than using a transcription service, meant that I picked up a lot of detail that I had missed during the actual interviews and common themes began to emerge. Once audio files were safely transferred to my computer, I deleted them from my dictaphone. All data including basic facts about the participants, audio files and transcriptions from recordings were encrypted and stored securely on a password-protected computer. Only I had access to the transcripts, and they were not shared on a network.

Some of the apprentices had provided me with their e-mail address, so I was able to share the transcripts of their own interviews. They were able to check the accuracy of the

transcript and confirm that they had been able to express their views freely. Checking data in this way can help to verify its accuracy, which is important when converting something as complex as a raw experience into simple text (Huberman and Miles, 1998, pp. 181-182). A couple of participants provided additional comments or clarifications. Jade was able to add some further detail about the support she received from her colleagues and in my transcript of Alfie's interview, I had confused his assessor and line manager, so I was able to correct that.

### **iii. Coding and describing data**

Interpretation of qualitative data requires both inspiration and careful detection (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 199), and every piece of data collected is a potential clue that needs to be carefully described and logged. Before I could analyse and synthesise the data, I had to sort it into specific ideas and examples that might go on to become themes. I had to negotiate a way to describe and code these ideas, before identifying which would be of particular importance.

Hours of interviews generated hundreds of pages of transcripts, and I used a number of different techniques to reduce, display and analyse systematically all the data that I had collected (Huberman and Miles, 1998, pp. 180-181). I used a simple elemental system to codify my data. I had one Excel spreadsheet with details about each apprentice and an additional spreadsheet for responses. Appendix I is an example of tabulated responses from the initial study. Tabulation then enabled me to sort the data, displaying it in a way that allowed me to read across all the answers to a particular question and read down all the

answers from a particular participant. Further spreadsheets summarised responses to specific questions (Appendix J). Later versions of my research questions were slightly different with some questions merged and some new questions, I therefore had to adjust my spreadsheets to link questions to the closest match and include new lines for additional questions. This also allowed me to create figures to illustrate the key features of the research participants (Figures 3-7). In order to code the data I removed superfluous words. I reduced whole sentences that I had transcribed to key words and phrases and took out any data that I deemed to be irrelevant to my research. By this stage I was starting to anticipate where the data might take me.

As with transcribing, I began the process of analysing the data during my initial study and continued in parallel with interviews. Collecting, transcribing and analysing data in parallel made the process manageable and allowed me to learn from early findings, adapt my questions and quickly identify emergent themes. It did mean that I had to return to early transcriptions and spreadsheets several times in order to recode responses as the taxonomy evolved, with the addition of new codes and the combining of others. At one point I had 71 different codes, but as I developed commentaries on each of these, more connections became apparent and I was able to merge codes, reducing the number to a more manageable 28. The process of analysis was lengthy, but it allowed me to immerse myself in the data; I became really familiar with the individual experiences and continued to make new connections throughout the duration of the study.

#### **iv. Identifying, conceptualising and classifying themes**

The simple system used to codify data gathered from the interviews allowed me to develop a taxonomy of themes (Saldana, 2009, p. 66). Appendix J shows how responses were codified. Once this task was completed for all questions I could begin to identify patterns within the data. I searched for any similarities and differences between responses to each question in order to see what could be generalised and whether particular experiences did or did not link to specific features of the apprentice or apprenticeship. I created additional workbooks to make it easier to isolate and cluster responses by theme; for example, interview questions 7, 9, 10 and 12 all generated responses that touched on the theme of apprentice identity. I was then able to identify what apprentices had to say about the subject and create a mind map linking my findings to relevant theory (Appendix M).

This made analysis much easier; I was able to confirm the relevance of the themes that had been identified during the literature review. I was able to start to conceptualise data, seeing how any generalisation might relate to the literature, and might help me to build on existing theory. Several participants alluded to a lack of choice, and I was able to link this to theory of power that had emerged from my literature review. I was also able to identify new themes; for example, I began to explore the idea of links between how much the apprentice knew about the apprenticeship programme before he or she started and the expected outcome. I picked out the key words related to each theme from each transcript and began to cluster some of the stories or ideas that came from the participants. This process was not simple, because it involved an analysis of the meaning of the stories, rather than simply the words used (Huberman and Miles, 1998, p. 180) and then struggling to relate it to theory

from a disparate range of academic disciplines and traditions. I set up whiteboards above my desk and used these to experiment with various analytical tools. This helped me to make sense of all the data and make links between the key points that emerged from my data, and relevant literature and theory (Appendices M and N).

#### **v. Connecting and synthesising data**

As the analysis continued I identified the most important themes and clusters of key words that were relevant to each. These helped me to locate and compare data more easily as I revisited my transcripts and field notes to find detailed examples. To help visualise my findings I used a web tool, WordClouds to create word cloud depictions for each question based on the transcripts of my interviews, as sorted by question. Appendix O shows the word cloud for question 3, which focused on the features of any training that apprentices said that they received. Words that have been used most frequently are shown with greater prominence, so from this example it is easy to see that apprentices highlighted the importance of the assessor and the mentor in the delivery and quality of training and the importance of the portfolio in how training is delivered. The word cloud image does not give any indication about whether, for example, the apprentices had described 'assessors' in a positive or negative light, but I found the tool helpful for illustrating the themes and the links between interview questions and supporting the detailed analysis.

#### **vi. Interpreting, creating meaning and explaining**

The next stage was to interpret all my emerging findings in order to make sense of them. At this stage I needed to make important decisions about which of my findings I wanted to

present and how. I returned to my earlier analysis tools, in particular the mind maps that I had created, this allowed me to revisit earlier interpretations to see if they had been borne out by the evidence. I also considered how my findings could add to existing theory. I kept coming back to the connections I had made between the apprentices' knowledge about apprenticeships and their expectations. As I had not found any literature making this connection, I felt that the idea could be developed as an emerging theory. Initially, I thought that apprentices who had very little knowledge about the programme when they started their apprenticeship would have no, or very low, expectations about the apprenticeship. As I analysed the transcripts, I noticed that the relationship between the two was more complicated and I suspected that this might affect the apprentices' perceptions of success (Bandura, 2012). I developed a matrix model and used this as a conceptual framework to address this complexity. I also produced vignettes of some of the apprentices to provide evidence to support the theory. This is explained in the next chapters.

I was able to use the four categories identified in Table 3: individual characteristics, employer features, provider characteristics and system features (Hogarth et al., 2009, p. 49), to categorise and explain factors that participants had said could determine the success of an apprenticeship (Appendix P). In addition, I compared my findings to Fuller and Unwin's (2010, p. 7) expansive/restrictive continuum to consider links between apprenticeships that have expansive characteristics and those judged to be successful by the apprentices (Table 11).



Iterative analysis of the data eventually led to conclusions that contribute to the body of knowledge about the experience of apprentices. It also led to a new understanding of the relationship between the apprentice, employer and training provider that I believe builds on a traditional sociocultural approach, by fully acknowledging the impact of the apprentice for the first time. My research applies theories from a growing body of research into the learner voice to the debate on apprenticeships, where they have not yet had much impact.

### **vii. Verifying**

Verification of findings is usually achieved through generalisability, reliability and validity (Kvale, 1996, p. 229). However, an entirely different approach is needed for ethnographic studies (Mills and Morton, 2013, p. 9; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). One response to critics of qualitative research is to ensure that the research process has its own rigour and accountability (Hammersley, 1992, p. 28). My research has focused on the experiences of 33 apprentices, each of whom had a different background, journey and mind set, at a particular point in time. By providing details about the methods I have used, and the apprentices who participated, readers can make their own judgements about the appropriateness of the methods, quality of the data, plausibility of my findings and the extent to which my conclusions might apply to other apprentices, or other vocational learners.

My systematic approach to the collection, recording and analysis of data supports the authenticity of my claims. I have been transparent in describing the methods used, and have included the questions that I used within the appendices. I tested my methods

rigorously during the initial study, and continued to improve them throughout the study. I sent participants a copy of the transcript from their interview, and invited them to report any inaccuracies or clarify any points. This was intended to reassure participants that I was providing an accurate representation of their views, but it also helped to confirm the accuracy of my data.

I was conscious of my own bias and made efforts to avoid making assumptions about participants, or influencing outcomes. This was a learning process and conducting an initial study allowed me to change the way that I conducted interviews and adapt my interview templates in order to avoid leading questions. I explain my research position and the methodology that I decided to use in order to collect evidence to answer my research questions. I describe why interviewing was selected as my research method and how the research was planned. I set out the main ethical considerations for this study and how I managed ethical issues. I explain why I conducted an initial study and what I learned from it. I explain my decision to include data from my initial study within my main research findings. I then describe the main phase of the research including the selection and recruitment of participants. I provide details about the interview process, including iterations of the research questions and instruments. I explain how I transcribed and interpreted the data. Finally, the chapter explains how I have ensured the validity and quality of my research. The final stage of Kvale's seven stages of interview investigation is reporting, and this is covered in the next chapter, which focuses on the research findings that emerged from my study of apprentices. Findings have been organised according to the

three research questions. Quotations and examples are used to help illustrate and make sense of my findings.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the main findings that emerged from an analysis of my recordings, transcripts and field notes. I have organised my findings according to the three research questions. Throughout this chapter I present quotations from the apprentices, and examples that are intended to be indicative of particular perspectives and issues. Any conclusions have not been arrived at on the basis of a single quotation from an apprentice, but rather through locating them within a context of a critical use of theory (Mills and Morton, 2013, p. 28).

### **RQ1 - How do 16-24-year-old apprentices describe their experience of apprenticeship?**

During my research, I not only asked apprentices to describe their experiences, but also the meanings that they made of them; what Gray (2009, p. 31) describes as ‘perspective- or opinion-seeking’. Approaching the study from a social construct perspective meant that I was able to challenge dominant views of apprentices as a homogeneous group with similar experiences. I discovered that, instead, apprentices are heterogeneous and disparate. They are the product of numerous social processes that affect who becomes an apprentice and how they experience that apprenticeship. One area of difference was the prior experiences of the apprentices that I interviewed. Figure 7 demonstrates the range of prior experiences that were described by the apprentices. The largest group had come to the apprenticeship straight from school, but others had been doing full-time vocational courses in college. Some had left another job, or had been unemployed immediately prior to starting their apprenticeship. Four had completed apprenticeships before, either at a lower level or in a

different occupation, and two had decided not to continue with degree programmes. The rest had been existing members of staff who had been encouraged by their employers to take the apprenticeship. It is important to remember that this study excluded any apprentice over 24 years of age, therefore the diversity of the whole apprentice population is likely to be even greater than that found within my study.

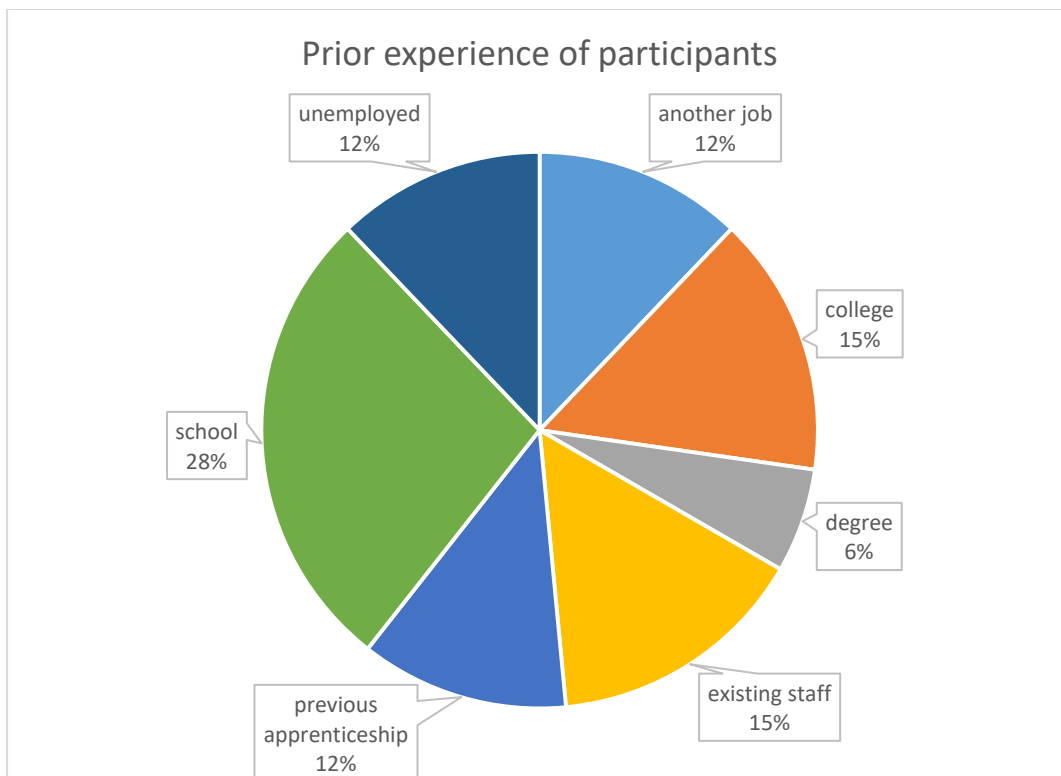


Figure 7: What the participants had been doing prior to starting the apprenticeship

How the apprentices felt about their prior experiences of education also varied:

*I hated college, I was bullied and I stopped going to classes. Then they asked me to leave, like it was all my fault...I couldn't even get a stupid NVQ and I felt like such a failure.*

Angel (20), level 2 retail apprentice

*My teacher said that I should stay at school and go into the sixth form because my grades were good enough, but none of the A-levels interested me. I couldn't wait to start work.*

Kristen (19), level 3 licensed hospitality apprentice

Generalising apprentices as academic failures would not be accurate, therefore. The apprentices who participated in my study had a wide range of different career goals. Some wanted to progress to another apprenticeship at a higher level, and a few mentioned ambitions to start their own business eventually. The majority wanted to stay with their current employer, and most of these felt confident that they would get some sort of promotion at some point in the future. Two of the participants said that they had not really considered their future plans, but these were both at a relatively early stage of their apprenticeship.

I was also interested in how the participants thought that apprenticeships were perceived by others. Several of the apprentices said that apprenticeships are still viewed as second rate, and Carly explained how she had to convince a parent about the value of an apprenticeship:

*When I explained to mum what I actually did at work like arranging big conferences and negotiating prices, and how much I got paid she finally accepted that it was actually a real job, not just skivvyng and making the tea.*

Carly (19), level 3 licensed hospitality apprentice

The apprentices' experiences of careers advice at school highlighted the perception of the low status of apprenticeships compared to academic courses. The majority of the apprentices told me that their schools or further education colleges had provided minimal information about apprenticeships, and the information they had been given was largely

negative. Several described pressure to choose an academic programme rather than an apprenticeship:

*I did fill out a UCAS form, because my school said I had to, but I never wanted to go to uni. No one offered me any help to apply for my apprenticeship.*

Lottie (19), level 3 marketing apprentice

*Everyone...my teachers, my parents and my friends all said, 'you don't want to do an apprenticeship, university is better'.*

Yasmin (21), level 3 customer service apprentice

This is consistent with the literature. Unlike full-time education, apprentices have a dual role of employee and learner. Many of the apprentices seemed to have difficulties reconciling these roles. Some rejected the apprentice label altogether, favouring an occupational identity rather than an identity as a particular type of learner. One of the apprentices volunteered that she had, on occasion, deliberately concealed her apprentice status from colleagues and clients:

*Some of my colleagues put 'apprentice' on their e-mail [signature], I don't, because I don't think it sounds very professional.*

Parveen (23), level 3 healthcare support apprentice

Parveen further explained that, to her, the word apprentice was tied to being a trainee or someone who is not qualified, and that was not how she felt, or how she wanted others to see her. She was proud of her job, but keen to leave her status as a learner behind her.

Professional communities provide an additional social process, that the literature suggests will benefit apprentices (Brockmann, 2012; Chan, 2011, p. 13). A few of the apprentices who took part in this study identified with one or more professional or occupational community, and where this was the case, they reported an increased commitment to a

particular career or organisation. Sasha explained how engaging with an occupational community enhanced her connectedness with others, and gave her access to additional resources:

*My manager helped me to apply for an award for best retail apprentice after we saw it in a newsletter. I didn't win or nothing, but...meeting other people working in retail made me feel like part of a community.*

Sasha (21), level 2 retail apprentice

Given the diversity and the relatively short duration of apprenticeships, it is, perhaps, not surprising that few of the apprentices said that they felt like part of a 'community of apprentices', although examples of communities within workplaces were provided:

*All the apprentices at work get together every few weeks to discuss our progress and work on projects. Last month a few of us got together and we actually solved a problem with one of the IT networks – no one else had been able to do that and it had been slowing down work, but us apprentices, we fixed it.*

Mo (21), level 3 information technology apprentice

I found evidence of similar diversity in the way that the apprenticeship training was organised, particularly with the delivery of off-the-job training, even within the same training provider and the same apprenticeship occupation. About half of the apprentices that I interviewed received regular training away from the workplace. These apprentices usually attended classes once a week or once a fortnight, although a few had received a block of full-time training at the start of the apprenticeship. The rest of the apprentices were visited in their workplace by their assessor/trainer. Both terms were used interchangeably, demonstrating that with apprenticeship frameworks, the same individual is often responsible for delivering the training and assessing the apprentice.



When I asked the apprentices what it felt like to do an apprenticeship, they provided a wide range of views, and a few became a little emotional. For some, the apprenticeship was an exciting opportunity that they were determined to make the most of, for others, the apprenticeship was merely a 'means to an end'. A few viewed the apprenticeship as confirmation that they had failed, either as learners or workers. This wide range of views seemed to relate to the different histories of individual apprentices and their expectations for the apprenticeship; their current relationship with the programme content and delivery, including their interactions with the employer, and training provider; and their personal sense of power and agency, often manifesting in their future plans (Schoon, 2018). It was quite clear that any qualitative analysis of apprenticeships needs to recognise the complexity of social, societal, pedagogical and personal factors affecting each apprentice. A critical discussion of the experiences of the individual apprentices is included in chapter 5, allowing me to relate their experiences to relevant theory.

## **RQ2 - What factors do apprentices consider support or hinder the quality or success of an apprenticeship?**

The apprentices had a great deal to say about what contributes to the quality and success of an apprenticeship. For some of those interviewed, securing a job represented success, whilst others aspired to further study and more senior positions.

*My mam said that if I get a trade, I will be set for life...but I really love saying, "I made that."*

Kieran (21), level 2 construction apprentice

*I might not earn a fortune, but people will always need childcare, won't they? I love working with the little ones so I'm happy here for now, but I may do some nannying abroad or be my own boss someday.*

Jade (20), level 3 children and young people's workforce apprentice

My findings confirmed that the notion of success is highly subjective and personal. The apprentices were able to construct their own versions of success, challenging the official narrative. This was often done in terms of looking back on a completed apprenticeship in order to judge the success of its outcome:

- permanent employment and the start of a career
- promotion and enhanced career prospects
- improving esteem, job satisfaction, motivation and stretch
- a satisfying learning experience
- a qualification
- getting to the end
- better networks.

Quality was seen as more immediate, tangible and quantifiable elements of the delivery of the apprenticeship:

- good training materials
- relevant content
- reliable trainer
- a mentor
- decent pay and conditions
- the chance to try a job and learn different aspects of the business
- improved performance at work
- proof that you can do the job.

I found evidence that good communication is an important factor in a successful apprenticeship. Although some of the apprentices and employers had the same vision of what a successful outcome would be, poor communication meant that both parties were

ignorant of each other's plans. This meant that the vision, though common, could not be described as shared:

*When the apprenticeship is over, I want to stay with Gables. I have heard some apprentices might get promoted, but no one has really discussed what happens after the apprenticeship with me.*

Rubina (21), level 2 business administration apprentice

From my recordings, notes and transcripts, it was possible to identify common themes. I found Hogarth et al.'s taxonomy of characteristics associated with apprenticeship completion and drop-out (Table 3) a helpful way to group the characteristics that participants in my study used to construct their own definitions of success and quality.

#### **i. Individual characteristics**

Many of the apprentices made reference to their own strengths and personal characteristics in describing whether or not the experience had been positive. My findings show a huge difference in the levels of agency that different apprentices had (Schoon, 2018), with some feeling that they were in control of their learning and career:

*At the end of the apprenticeship the best apprentices will end up with the best jobs so I have to push myself to stand out.*

Yasmin (21), level 3 customer service apprentice

The literature raised issues of agency and power (Schoon, 2018; Raven, 2008; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Apprentices described episodes of loneliness, confusion, frustration and disappointment. One of the apprentices had left before completing the apprenticeship.

Henry summed up his lack of agency and sense of powerlessness:

*I don't really have a career, I mean I didn't expect to be an apprentice at my age, but I couldn't get anything better.*

Henry (20), level 2 business administration apprentice

My position is not that some individuals have 'better' characteristics than other, but that a range of factors influenced the level of confidence and motivation that the apprentices felt, in particular their backgrounds and the way they were treated by their employer. I contend that by acknowledging the range of different experiences, characteristics, influences and outcomes, my findings help make sense of the way that apprentices themselves contribute to the quality and success of the apprenticeship.

## **ii. Employer features**

The apprentices explained how their employer affects the quality of the apprenticeship. Negative accounts included a lack of interest from the employer, uncertainty over job prospects, poor pay, lack of support or time for study, and poor communication. These are all social processes and rarely feature in official measures of quality. Thirteen of the apprentices complained that they had not been able to attend some of their training, because they were too busy at work, and they felt that this reduced the quality of their apprenticeship:

*College, well, it's important – I mean that is where we learn all the stuff that they don't teach us at work, but when [my manager] says he can't spare me, well I can't just get up and go, can I?*

Josh (17), level 2 construction building apprentice

Positive experiences included examples of real commitment shown by some employers to the success of the apprenticeship, and to the success of the apprentices themselves. Some

apprentices explained how the support of their line manager, mentor or colleagues had helped them to overcome challenges and succeed.

The Richard Review of Apprenticeships (2012) was based on an assumption that employers want and need responsibility for the design of apprenticeships and delivery of the on-the-job training. One of the employers that I interviewed wanted to provide effective support to the apprentice, but did not know how. Another employer did not believe that it was necessary for him to have any role in the apprenticeship training. I found evidence of effective partnerships; the senior manager at the healthcare provider in the south west was responsible for all staff training and explained why he chose to employ apprentices. His social construction of apprenticeships was that they benefitted the organisation and the apprentice. He felt that apprenticeships helped the company to attract the best applicants from the competitive local labour market. He had 'auditioned' nine different training providers before selecting one to run the company's apprenticeship training. He saw it as essential that the training provider and the employer shared a 'philosophy' around supporting apprentices. He placed apprenticeships at the heart of the organisation's staff development programme. He set a target for a 90 per cent apprentice retention rate across the organisation, which is well above the national average. His definition of success involved rapid progression for the apprentices; and for the company, steady growth in apprentice numbers and the range of apprenticeship subjects and levels on offer.

Some employers had reorganised their workplaces and workforces to support 'expansive' learning. Examples included, enabling apprentices to rotate in order to experience different

teams and departments, pairing apprentices with more experienced workers, facilitating work on suitable and stretching projects, and allowing apprentices to communicate with each other more easily. Other workplaces showed no evidence of adapting to facilitate the needs of the apprentice. By interviewing the apprentices, it was clear that they could tell whether or not their workplace was effective in supporting their apprenticeship. By comparing accounts of different experiences, I began to identify the features of expansive and restrictive workplaces (Fuller and Unwin, 2010).

### **iii. Provider characteristics**

The accounts given by the apprentices about the way that training was delivered suggested that any of the different methods of delivering off-the-job training can be effective, but my findings showed that the apprentices who received training in college generally reported more regular contact with their assessor/trainer and more time to actually undertake learning than apprentices whose off-the-job training was mostly provided in the workplace.

Some apprentices described great rapport with their assessor, flexible learning opportunities, relevant training, high quality training materials and excellent feedback. Complaints about the reliability of the assessor/trainer, however, were common regardless of whether the training was delivered in the workplace or at the training provider's premises, suggesting that consistency is important for apprentices:

*The assessors are OK at their job and that, but last week I was told that I was getting a new assessor. This will be the fourth since I started my apprenticeship seven months ago.*

Amy (19), level 2 business administration apprentice

Other negative experiences related to the quality of the apprenticeship, included uncertainty about the programme structure, timetable and progress, poor communication, cancelled classes and meetings, irrelevant units, or out-of-date content or equipment, poor quality training and training materials. Many of the apprentices criticised the use of portfolios, the main tool for assessing apprentices who are taking apprenticeship frameworks. Some of the apprentices complained that their assessor provided too much 'help', leaving the apprentices to *'just copy out information'*, or *'complete missing words'* on worksheets. Rather than a tool for formative learning and a record of achievement, the portfolio became a *'boring list of things to tick off'*. One apprentice told me that she felt that the assessor was telling her what to write *'to rush me through it all, like, she is signing off my units, but I don't understand them'*. Other apprentices felt that they were not given enough help, they felt they were left to try to *'figure out what evidence I need for myself'*. In either case, the apprentices did not feel confident in what they were learning and this has implications for their views about the quality of their apprenticeships.

Apprentices said that having a reliable and consistent trainer/assessor was essential to the quality of their apprenticeship. According to the apprentices, the best apprenticeships involve working closely with one or two people from the training provider. They disliked assessors who turned up late or missed scheduled meetings and they resented having to explain their progress each time a new assessor was appointed. The quality of training materials was also felt to be essential. Guidance needs to be sufficiently clear without being *'patronising'*, and there is a need for training providers to use terminology, systems and equipment that is consistent with the workplace. Some apprentices recognised the

importance of partnerships and suggested the need for a co-ordinated induction programme, involving the employer and training provider.

#### **iv. System features**

Positive system-related experiences included securing a job, clear progression routes, and ‘free’ training. Negative experiences consisted of irrelevant content, poor careers advice, not enough apprenticeships available and being seen as ‘second-rate’. Some of the apprentices referred to a lack of communication and co-ordination between apprentice, training provider and employer. Analysis of the interviews suggested that where the line manager is involved in selecting optional units, creating opportunities to provide evidence and holding progress reviews with the apprentices and/or assessor, both the apprentice and line manager were more likely to express confidence and satisfaction with the training:

*At the start of the apprenticeship I sat down with my assessor and my talent coach and we discussed which optional units would be best for me. Because I am doing customer service, there is a lot of choice and it was good that they let me have a say.*

Yasmin (21), level 3 customer service apprentice

*It is really important to discuss the content with the apprentice and the assessor. Some units are not right for the business and some aren't right for the apprentice. We have been caught out in the past and it was a disaster.*

Frank, employer, ServCo

Most of the apprentices that took part had limited knowledge about apprenticeship policy, or recent reforms, so were not able to say much about any difficulties or opportunities that these afforded, but for the apprentices, the relevance of the training was particularly important in the success of the apprenticeship. My review of literature revealed that previous measures of apprenticeship success were mostly limited to superficial measures



such as completion rates or policy priorities such as the return on investment for the employer (Higton et al., 2013; Vivian et al., 2012). The apprentices that took part in this study; however, reported that these measures were largely irrelevant to them. The measures were part of someone else's social construction and the apprentices had their own priorities. The apprentices said that government should make more apprenticeships available, promote the programme as a good choice, and provide more information about the purpose of an apprenticeship and what apprentices can expect to do and learn.

When asked about pay, some of the apprentices said that it was too low and that the apprenticeship rate of National Minimum Wage harmed the status of apprentices and acted as a deterrent to people considering an apprenticeship. Some of the training provider staff mentioned the new requirements for 20 per cent of the apprentices' time to be off the job, saying that this would be very difficult to prove and costly to deliver. All of the employers that I interviewed were concerned about the introduction of the new apprenticeship levy, because of uncertainty about how it would affect them financially or in terms of how they managed their apprenticeship programmes. This is consistent with findings from other research (Newton et al., 2019).

I was interested in whether apprentices considered themselves customers in relation to their training provider, because I thought it might affect their views on the quality of the programme (Canning, 2017). I felt this was important because dominant measures of apprenticeship success often take a transactional perspective and focus on economic value (Williams, 2011). In fact, none of the apprentices that I interviewed described themselves

as a customer and I got the impression that this would never have occurred to them. It is possible this was because the apprentices were not funding the training personally, but there may be more to it than that. I had included a question to test whether apprentices knew who actually paid for their apprenticeship training. Only the apprentices who worked for a training provider really understood the funding. Thirteen of the other apprentices that I interviewed were aware of some sort of arrangement between the government and their employer. Two mistakenly believed that their employer was funding all of their training. The remaining apprentices had never thought about it, and had no idea how their training was funded. Many of the apprentices were previously in school or full-time college, and as these programmes are both fully-funded by the government, they would never have needed to consider funding. This finding contrasts with degree programmes where people are increasingly aware of the costs. Funding for apprenticeships is complex and is often hidden from the learner. The participants also explained that apprentices do not tend to select an apprenticeship in the same way that a student chooses which universities to apply to. For most of the apprentices, they were applying for a job rather than an apprenticeship. Applicants are, therefore, not usually able to pick and choose. When they are offered an apprenticeship position, they either accept it or they don't, but they felt that this put them in a position of weakness regarding their ability to influence the quality of their training. One apprentice recalled that she spent a lot of time complaining to friends about the quality of her training, but had never voiced her concerns to her employer or training provider. Only two of the apprentices that I interviewed recalled being asked to complete any kind of satisfaction survey relating to the quality of their apprenticeship training, which suggests

that there is little evidence yet of the impact of the learner voice within apprenticeships.

My interviews with training provider staff revealed that some did see apprentices as customers:

*As an assessor I need to demonstrate that I am providing a good service [to the apprentices]. I always ask them what I could be doing better or what more they need from me and it is part of my annual performance review.*

Gwen, Senior Assessor, VTM Training

I did not, however, find evidence of any attempt by the training providers that took part in the study to systematically measure and improve the apprentice experience. None of the training providers routinely surveyed apprentices, although they did provide examples of how they had adapted the programme to meet the needs of their apprentices, such as offering classes in the evenings and support by text.

### **RQ3 - What significance does the relationship between the apprentice, employer and training provider have on the apprentices' experience?**

I found evidence that the partnership between the apprentice, training provider and employer was not always effective, particularly in ensuring the relevance of the training and the motivation of apprentices:

*We spent a whole day learning to use a tool at the training place, then back on the site the gaffer said, "We don't use them no more". It's stuff like that that winds me right up.*

Rob (24), level 3 construction building apprentice

Interviews with apprentices and employers revealed differences in the extent to which different employers understand and want to participate in the delivery of apprenticeships.

Whilst the apprentices interviewed supported the aims of the Commitment Statement,

introduced in 2016 to ensure that all parties understand their role in delivering the apprenticeship (Skills Funding Agency 2016, p. 30), the majority did not believe that the existence of a document would necessarily have any impact on the quality of their apprenticeship. A few apprentices remembered signing a commitment statement at the start of their apprenticeship, but none remembered what it said or had looked at it again. When I mentioned the Commitment Statement, it was clear that some of the apprentices recognised its significance as a social process designed to make them feel like they had power, whilst actually giving them nothing. Without such insights into how policy operates in practice, policy makers cannot understand all the factors that affect quality, or whether particular policy changes such as the introduction of the Commitment Statement are working.

The frequency of assessor/trainer visits varied from once a fortnight to once every 13 weeks. Some of the apprentices were not sure what the role of the assessor/trainer was, but many felt the role was limited to providing guidance on collecting and presenting evidence, and signing off units of work when the apprentice had produced sufficient evidence. Some of the apprentices noted that the assessor/trainer also had a role in co-ordinating with the employer; for example, in making sure that forms were signed and that the apprentice had time off when needed for exams or study. Approximately one third of the apprentices felt that there was a close relationship between the assessor and employer and that, where this was the case, the employer was more likely to be able to support the learning.

The importance of having someone who the apprentice feels comfortable discussing things with has emerged as an important theme since the first interview for my initial study when Sara asked, 'is that normal?' As a result I added questions about who apprentices go to with any questions or concerns. For some apprentices their line manager felt like the natural and appropriate person. This was the case where they had a positive working relationship and the line manager had a good understanding of the apprenticeship. Some of the apprentices also relied on colleagues for support. For many of the apprentices, their assessor was their chosen confidante and some assessors were described as 'helpful and understanding'. The childcare apprentices relied on other apprentices and former apprentices who understood what they were going through and had knowledge of the job and course content.

Approximately half of the apprentices said that they had been assigned a mentor when they started their apprenticeship. For some this had been helpful, particularly for the first few months of the apprenticeship. Some apprentices were not happy with the relationship, saying that having someone assigned to them was not as effective as having someone who they decided for themselves that they could trust:

*I was told that Cath would be my mentor. I sent her an e-mail, but she didn't reply so I have never spoken to her.*

Amy (19), level 2 business administration apprentice

A common finding was that a good mentor could act as a coach and advocate, providing support and guidance throughout the apprenticeship. Related to the idea of a mentor is that of a peer network. The childcare apprentices described how they support each other through the apprenticeship, operating as a small and informal apprentice network. There were several former apprentices within the nursery who helped the apprentices to gather

and present evidence for their apprenticeship portfolios. The college apprentices were keen to establish a network of peers to help improve the apprenticeship programme for all apprentices within the college and secondly to provide a support network. Their ideas included an apprentice parliament and a social media page for apprentices. ServCo had set up an online apprentice forum and encouraged its apprentices to support each other.

My findings suggest that the success of an apprenticeship is closely linked to the success of the relationship between apprentice and training provider, training provider and employer and apprentice and employer. The commitment of all three partners provided the main ingredients for a quality experience and successful outcome.

This chapter presents the main findings that emerged from an analysis of my transcripts and field notes. The concepts of learner voice and the apprentice as a customer emerged from early interviews, and these emergent themes led to further iterations of the literature review, research questions and research instruments. In the next chapter I present a new model that I developed to help make sense of the experiences of different apprentices. The model explains the relationship between the level of knowledge about an apprenticeship, and the expectations of the apprentice when they began the programme. I provide a more detailed analysis of the experiences of individual apprentices, linking these to relevant theory and literature.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I return to the main aim of my research, to begin to fill gaps in our knowledge of the experience of apprentices, including their views on how to understand and improve quality and success. I show how a new matrix model, developed from my findings, could help to make sense of the experience of apprentices, and support their needs, in order to bring about improvements in the way that apprenticeships are designed and delivered. I analyse my findings, relate them to the main theories that I identified from the literature review and discuss the wider practical and theoretical implications of my study.

### **5.1 Developing a new tool to make sense of the apprentices' experiences**

I noticed that many of the apprentices had entered their apprenticeship with extremely limited knowledge about the programme and there seemed to be a relationship between levels of knowledge and agency. Some apprentices had wanted a job and ended up on an apprenticeship, because the job that they applied for happened to be an apprenticeship. A few were existing employees who were encouraged or pressured to take an apprenticeship by their employer. Some had applied because they had a feeling that an apprenticeship might be a good thing to do, even though they were not sure why.

I had asked apprentices to explain how they came to be on an apprenticeship, and as I began to analyse and compare their experiences, I started to notice a pattern in how different backgrounds and levels of knowledge affected their individual agency, their

expectations for the apprenticeship, and their personal definitions of quality and success (Schoon, 2018). I developed a matrix to help me to theorise my results and try to make sense of this data from a social construct perspective. The matrix offers the opportunity to show the outcomes of the various social processes, such as the impact of careers advice, peer pressure or success at school. I experimented with mapping the different levels of knowledge that each apprentice had about the programme when they began against their expectations for success. Expectations here included the extent to which the apprentice had clear goals relating to the apprenticeship and future career, and his or her self-efficacy, or belief that those goals would be achieved (Schoon, 2019, p. 6). As the apprentices expressed this in very different ways, part of my job was to analyse each apprentice's story in a way that allowed me to compare and contrast. In keeping with the value that I have placed on the apprentice voice, I used several of the apprentices' own terms to label different categories. The resulting matrix (Figure 8) could help others to make sense of the variety of experiences and tailor support to meet the needs of individual apprentices. As this study was undertaken as part of a professional doctorate, I was keen to establish a practical value of the findings, as well as more theoretical implications.



Knowledge (about apprenticeships)	high	<b>Conveyor belt</b> Nick, Jade Elise	<b>Realist</b> Amy, Kristen	<b>Elite</b> Mo, Yasmin Deepak
		<b>Sceptical</b> Keeley Trinny, Rick, Rob	<b>Open</b> Kieran Scott, Chloe, Lucy	<b>Optimistic</b> Georgina Will, Lottie
	low	<b>Resistant</b> Henry Sasha, Parveen, Djimon, Josh	<b>Pioneering</b> Angel, Sara Char, Alfie, Carly, Kyla, Rubina, Max	<b>Naive</b> Jon
		low		high
		Expectations (of apprenticeship)		

Figure 8: Categorising apprentices by levels of knowledge and expectations at the start of the apprenticeship

### i. Low levels of knowledge about apprenticeships

#### **Resistant** (low knowledge, low expectations)

I use the term ‘resistant’ in an attempt to capture what one group of apprentices shared about their experiences. The label describes apprentices who did not know much about apprenticeships when they began, but generally felt negative towards them and were, therefore, resistant to any idea that an apprenticeship could enhance their career or help them in any other way. The apprentices generally had a strong preconception that ‘apprenticeship’ equated to poor quality, although they admitted that they were not sure about the facts. Some also described being suspicious about the motives of their employer. One example was Henry.

#### **Henry**

*The only jobs for young people round here are all apprenticeships...and I needed to do something so...*

Henry (20), level 2 business administration apprentice

When I met Henry, he was in the third month of an apprenticeship at Gables, a large healthcare provider in the south-west of England. Whilst many of his friends had done A-levels and headed off to university, Henry had put his plans on hold to look after an elderly relative. As a consequence of his change in circumstances, Henry had recently relocated to a region of the country where he had no friends or support network. Henry needed a job to support himself, but found that with little previous work experience, the only jobs available to him seemed to be apprenticeships. Henry did not particularly like his job, dealing with customer enquiries. He found the title 'apprentice' patronising and just wanted to complete the apprenticeship so he could 'get on with the job'. Henry was clear that he did not expect the apprenticeship to help his career, and he was resistant to the idea that he could learn anything as a result of the apprenticeship.

**Pioneers** (low knowledge, medium expectations)

*You know, we really didn't have a clue what we were doing, but it was exciting and we felt like, like pioneers.*

Angel (20), level 2 retail apprentice

At 20, **Angel** was approaching the end of her one-year apprenticeship in retail. For Angel, the apprenticeship represented something new, exciting and a little scary, but she felt that it would probably improve her position. I used Angel's term, 'pioneers' to describe a group who had no prior experience of apprenticeships, nor did they have a strong support network to answer their questions and guide them. The pioneers had, however, recognised that they were not making good progress in their previous learning and career journeys. They felt that they had little to lose, and were willing to try something new; so, in this sense, they were pioneers. These apprentices had been able to keep an open mind and hoped that the

apprenticeship would help them to enter a career, or to make progress towards their eventual goal. In effect, they had put their trust in a programme, despite knowing little of the detail. By applying labels such as 'pioneer', I recognise that I risk imposing my own social construction of the apprentices' experiences as I try to interpret their narratives. During the interview I probed Angel to discover exactly what she meant by the term 'pioneer' to help my interpretation. My use of labels develops another set of constructs that may be more helpful than the ones that have tended to dominate literature and policy.

After school Angel had started a full-time college course in customer service but dropped out. Keen to help Angel, her uncle, Christophe offered her a job in his garden centre.

Although she loved the job, after four months Angel considered quitting work to return to full-time education:

*Working with Christophe is great, but I really wanted a qualification, so I started looking at other colleges. I felt like a traitor when I told Christophe, but he understood. The apprenticeship was actually his idea.*

Christophe's son had done an apprenticeship so he had some idea of what an apprenticeship is, but he knew very little about what was involved in delivery. My interviews with Angel and Christophe suggested that they saw the apprenticeship as a joint venture. Other pioneers, including Sara described the apprenticeship as something that they experienced in partnership with their employers. It was difficult, however, to engage Christophe in any detailed discussion about the delivery or content of training, because he thought that should be left to the 'experts'. Angel's desire to gain qualifications provides some evidence of the impact of credentialisation (Wolf, 2011, p. 28).

**Sara** provided a second example of a pioneer apprentice:

*I was drifting through part-time, temporary jobs. I had no career plan.*

Sara (22), level 3 business administration apprentice (Interview 1)

As much out of work as in, and unsure of what she wanted, things seemed to improve when Sara secured a permanent full-time job in a clothing store. After just three months, the shop closed, leaving Sara looking for work once again. Back at the job centre to sign on, Sara's back-to-work advisor mentioned a new vacancy:

*They said it was an apprenticeship, but I didn't really know what one of them was. It was full-time and it was permanent, so I applied.*

Three weeks later Sara found herself working for a small property company. When I first interviewed her, Sara was four months into her apprenticeship and struggling to make sense of her studies and her role within the company that employed her. At several points in the interview she asked, 'is that normal?' She sensed that the quality of her apprenticeship could be improved, and I felt that she wanted me to confirm her suspicions about the amount of training and support that she was receiving so she could do something about it. Sara had no frame of reference to judge her experiences as an apprentice and no one to check with, but her desire to take action in order to improve her situation seemed a good fit with the 'pioneer' label.

I found that apprenticeships can also be uncharted territory for employers. Sara's employers, Alan and Jo had set up ALR property management four years ago. Growth in the rental sector meant that they needed help in the office and while they were considering hiring their first employee, they were contacted by a training provider who suggested an apprentice. Alan and Jo admitted that they did not really understand what was involved,

but they were attracted by the training provider's promise of good staff retention and satisfaction rates. They liked the idea of supporting someone at the start of their career, but admitted that the low apprentice wage was also attractive. Four months into the apprenticeship, they also had concerns about whether the programme was giving Sara the training and support she needed.

The pioneer apprentices that I interviewed all worked in small (10-49 employees), or micro (0-9 employees) businesses, in sectors that do not have a history of apprenticeships. Smaller businesses are significant for a number of reasons: they accounted for 99.3 per cent of all private sector businesses at the start of 2016 (Federation of Small Businesses, 2017), so small and micro businesses collectively employ more people than any other type of business. In addition, the apprenticeship programme is expanding into a number of sectors that have not traditionally used apprenticeships (DfE, 2017d), so is a new option for some small businesses. Following the Richard Review, the government expects employers to engage more in the development and delivery of apprenticeships, but employers running small businesses often lack the time or resource to research the programme or to devise training plans (Newton et al., 2019, pp. 14-15). Small businesses may accept an off-the-shelf programme and rely on the training provider to deliver all the learning and support:

*Look, my job is to manage the business. I don't know anything about training and all that stuff - I'm happy to leave that to the experts.*

Christophe, employer

**Naïve** (low knowledge, high expectations)

I include in this group apprentices who spoke optimistically about the benefits, but, at the same time, also revealed that they knew little about apprenticeships. I have labelled this category 'naïve', because it involved such high expectations without a full command of the facts. It is important to note that my labels are intended as a description of each apprentice's situation and their response to it rather than a judgment of the apprentices themselves. One example was **Jon**, and his optimism was clear:

*This apprenticeship is my ticket to success, I will learn the business and keep getting promoted 'til I'm in charge.*

Jon (23), level 2 retail apprentice

Although Jon is in the same training provider retail cohort as Angel, the two have never met, because all their learning is delivered within their own workplaces. Jon works at a small shop attached to a craft carpentry business, Woodland Crafts. Jon told me that having dyslexia and autism meant that he had expected that it would be hard to find work, but that with an apprenticeship, employers might be more understanding if it took him longer to learn the job. Although it may not be the case that every business that employs an apprentice is supportive of those with particular disabilities and needs, Jon's employers were. Woodland Crafts has three partners and 20 members of staff. When the partners decided that they wanted an apprentice to help within the shop they found a training provider and selected Jon for interview. One of the partners told me that Jon had impressed them at the interview with his work ethic and sense of humour and the whole team valued Jon's contribution to the business. All three partners were former apprentices, having studied carpentry in the 1960s and 1970s:

*When I was young apprenticeships were all about crafts and working with your hands...Jon's apprenticeship is a world away from my experience...he is learning to run the shop and about customers...and invoices.*

Kevin, employer

Jon explained that he was surprised when he was offered the job, and accepted it without really considering what an apprenticeship was.

## **ii. Medium levels of knowledge about apprenticeships**

Some apprentices had some knowledge of what their apprenticeship would involve and what they could expect in terms of the training and employment when they began. To help make sense of their experiences, and in response to what they told me, I have labelled these apprentices as sceptical, open or optimistic, depending on their levels of expectation.

### **Sceptical** (medium knowledge, low expectations)

Although armed with some knowledge about what they could expect, this group of apprentices described suspicions about the motives of their employers, trainers or those who had encouraged them to do an apprenticeship.

*The teachers said I wouldn't like sixth form, because I was more practical and I should go to college or do an apprenticeship...I think they just wanted me to leave.*

Keeley (17), level 2 children and young people's workforce apprentice

**Keeley** had completed nine months of a level 2 apprenticeship at Cherubs nursery; she was the youngest apprentice I interviewed having just turned 17. Keeley found her apprenticeship on-line; she remembered attending an induction session organised by the training provider. Keeley said that the induction had given her a good idea about what she could expect, but she had not understood exactly what the apprenticeship involved. Keeley

had not realised that she would have to retake her English and mathematics GCSEs as part of the apprenticeship, and this had been a blow to her confidence. She should have been given time off work to study, but in practice she was studying English and mathematics in her own time. Keeley explained that she did not trust her employer and felt let down by the apprenticeship system. Although the nursery employed several former apprentices who could have helped Keeley, her shyness prevented her from making use of colleagues as a resource:

*Jade and Elise [the other apprentices] seem to be always asking questions of the seniors [experienced staff] and chatting away. I guess I prefer to work things out for myself, but some of the tasks that you are set...well, they are just impossible to make out and I don't like to bother people.*

When I returned to Cherubs the following year, I learned that Keeley had left the nursery without completing the apprenticeship. I would have liked to interview Keeley again to find out why she had left, but I was unable to get contact details for her.

Cherubs is a large day nursery with a staff of 18; it is owned and run by Mags who explained that she always has three or four apprentices. Regulations mean that nurseries like Cherubs need to maintain a strict ratio of children to qualified adults, and the apprentices, are to some extent, treated as units of labour. Mags pays apprentices the apprenticeship National Minimum Wage, because, *'they don't count as fully qualified...and that's the going rate'*. Mags was not particularly interested in the experience of the apprentices, or in how well the nursery functioned as a place of learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2010). When I asked Mags why she thought Keeley had left, she told me that some non-completion is inevitable. Mags took



a deficit view of non-completion, believing that any failure was down to shortcomings within the individual apprentice (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992).

**Open** (medium knowledge, medium expectations)

I identified a group of apprentices who had a reasonable understanding about what their apprenticeship would involve. They were open, but undecided as to whether the experience would be positive.

*I had some idea of what was involved, and if I didn't like it I could always leave and do something else.*

Kieran (21), construction building apprentice

Despite having a father who worked in construction and had been an apprentice, **Kieran** admitted that he had not known everything about what was involved when he started. Kieran had not particularly sought an apprenticeship, nor did he feel that he had been forced into it. For Kieran the apprenticeship was a means to an end, it operated as a gateway to a career in construction. When Kieran described his experience, it was as if he was trialling the apprenticeship to see how well it suited him and vice versa. As he neared the end of his apprenticeship, he reflected that things were working out well.

**Optimistic** (medium knowledge, high expectations)

The next group of apprentices that I identified were not aware of all the details, but readily accept the idea that their apprenticeship would be a positive experience. I also found evidence that these apprentices took a high level of personal responsibility for the success of their apprenticeship.

*I couldn't wait to start my apprenticeship. I love helping families at this difficult time, but the apprenticeship was going to make me better at my job.*

Georgina (24), level 3 healthcare support apprentice

**Georgina** had been employed at the hospice for about eighteen months before starting her apprenticeship, supporting people in the last few days or months of their lives by providing personal and emotional care. When an apprenticeship was suggested by her manager, she was given details about the programme and saw it as a great opportunity to develop new skills and provide even better care for her patients and their families. She was told that she would be given time off for training, but in practice she was expected to continue to do all the work that she had done previously, whilst also studying at college, and was struggling to fit travelling to and from college with her responsibilities as a young mother. Georgina had high expectations of herself and others, and felt frustrated by the service provided by her training provider:

*It's annoying when [the trainer] cancels class at the last minute, because I have to arrange my work and childcare to fit around classes.*

Georgina was keen to ensure a match between her studies and work and was keen to bring new ideas and learning into the workplace:

*Last month at college we learnt about a new study on bereavement. It talked about new ways to discuss death with relatives. I shared it with my manager and she got the whole team to read it.*

### **iii. High levels of knowledge about apprenticeships**

I found that some of the apprentices were very well informed about what an apprenticeship involves, usually because they knew people who had completed an apprenticeship, or because they had done a lot of research. Depending on their expectations, I have labelled these apprentices as 'conveyor belt', 'realistic', or 'elite'.

### **Conveyor belt** (high knowledge, low expectations)

The conveyor belt apprentices that I identified were all employed in the service sector where apprenticeships have grown rapidly during the early years of this century. The apprentices suggested that levels of knowledge are high because apprenticeships are so common within the sector, but these apprentices seemed to rely heavily on others to 'deliver' the training to them, rather than taking personal responsibility. They expected to be treated poorly, and to just 'muddle through' the apprenticeship in a fairly passive way:

*It's like I'm a product on a conveyor belt with each manager just adding a component.*

Nick (23), level 3 information technology apprentice

**Jade** had a lot of information about the apprenticeship before she began. On the surface she seemed to have a lot of confidence in herself. However, as we discussed her apprenticeship, it was clear that her expectations were actually quite low. The nursery where she works has a rolling programme of apprentices so the 'conveyor belt' analogy seemed to fit well. Apprentices were given a thorough induction before they begin, but because the employer has a ready supply of apprentices, and because working conditions for all staff in the sector are generally poor, expectations about the quality of the experience were low. There is little scope for the apprentices at Cherubs to contribute new ideas, they are expected to do what they are told. When I first interviewed Jade she had completed nine months of a level 2 apprenticeship. She explained that an apprenticeship is the main route into childcare and acts as a hurdle to overcome in order to access a career in the sector:

*I guess the apprenticeship is OK, it is mostly what I expected. I mean, the job is what it is – I love looking after children so it suits me. The training isn't too bad, although we have to do most of it in our own time.*

Jade (19), level 2 children and young people's workforce apprentice

Jade was aware that the nursery needed its apprentices to meet the early years' staff/child ratio, as well as to develop their skills. Early years' regulations include requirements for the number of qualified staff required to look after young children and the qualifications that they must hold (DfE, 2014). Jade had initially enrolled in a full-time childcare course, but soon realised that she wanted to 'look after children, not dolls'. Jade left college and found an apprenticeship at Cherubs nursery. She described her training as almost entirely on-the-job:

*Everyone here looks out for ways to help...when [colleagues] complete a referral form or assess an accident...they call all of us apprentices over. They explain what they are doing, where to find the forms and stuff...so that's how you learn.*

I re-interviewed Jade 18 months later when she had progressed to a level 3 apprenticeship. An assessor from a local training provider visits the apprentices at Cherubs. The amount of training provided is minimal, the assessor checks Jade's portfolio, ticks off completed units and sets the next lot of tasks using worksheets. The portfolio is the main form of assessment for apprenticeship frameworks (DfE, 2017a); however, Jade admitted that:

*I don't always understand the tasks, but the girls who finished last year show me what they did and we all muddle through together.*

Jade's experience demonstrates an awareness that she was subject to what Hodkinson et al. (1996) described as 'bounded rationalities', but there was also the sense that Jade wanted to succeed both within, and beyond the context of her bounds:

*They tell you what to do and well...you do it, and then when you get your qualifications, then you can stay or leave. And who knows, I might be the boss one day.*

Nick's choice of words, comparing himself to a 'product on a conveyor belt' suggests that he did not feel in control of his apprenticeship, he felt more like a passive product than a 'partner'. Nick's employer, ServCo provided a thorough induction and a highly-structured programme, but it did not meet Nick's own expectations. Nick indicated that, although he had a personal development plan, it did not represent his own ambitions, and he did not feel any ownership of the plan. Whilst he recognised the benefits of ServCo's apprenticeship programme, Nick was suspicious of the motives of his colleagues:

*Some of the staff are jealous of the attention that us apprentices get. We are always put on show or asked to speak at corporate events...All the attention is nice and that, but with some managers it feels like a bit of an act.*

Nick (23), level 3 information technology apprentice

Although I have classified both as 'conveyor belt' apprentices, Jade had a completely different experience to Nick. Both had low expectations, and whilst Jade's low expectations were met, Nick was not comfortable when his were exceeded. Because Nick identified as an employee rather than an apprentice, he was uncomfortable with being made to feel different from other employees.

**Realist** (high knowledge, medium expectations)

I chose the title, 'realist' to represent apprentices who understood what their apprenticeship would involve, but who modified their expectations, because they were aware of the range of factors that can affect the quality and outcomes of the apprenticeship. Apprentices in this group did not see any one partner as having

responsibility for quality, and they did not think that their success was solely on their shoulders.

Like Henry, **Amy** works for Gables Healthcare; she is one of 37 apprentices recruited by the company three months ago and is visited regularly by assessors. Apprenticeship frameworks consist of a number of mandatory and optional units, and all the Gables apprentices are taking the same units regardless of which area of the business they work in:

*Some of the apprenticeship is irrelevant. I work in the call centre but I had to sit on reception for a whole day just to complete one of the units.*

Amy (19), level 2 business administration apprentice

Several of the apprentices that I interviewed described a mismatch between their apprenticeship and their job, because no attempt had been made to tailor off-the-shelf programmes to the work they were doing, or to align their work with the training. Little consideration was given to the experience of the apprentices, and apprenticeships are seen as what everyone does. Amy also identified a mismatch between her experience and the training provider's claims about the support it provided. Staff from the training provider said that each apprentice worked with a single lead assessor who was their main point of contact, but Amy did not know who her lead assessor was:

*I think I have seen four assessors so far. I don't know who is supposed to be looking after me.*

Hodkinson et al., (1996, pp. 41-44), and Akkerman and Bakker, (2012, p. 155) also found evidence of a mismatch between job and apprenticeship. An analysis of her words suggests that Amy has an expectation of her relationship with her training provider that is not being fulfilled. Her words 'looked after', however, suggest that, for Amy, the relationship that she

expects is more like that of adult/child or teacher/pupil, than customer/service provider. If training providers better understand the apprentices' expectations, they may be able to improve the way the programme is delivered.

Keith is a senior manager at Gables Healthcare and was proud of the growth of the apprenticeship programme, and what had been achieved in the eight years since the firm had taken on its first three apprentices. He explained how having so many apprentices had helped the company to be more competitive within the local labour market:

*A few years ago, we really struggled to attract new employees. Offering a package that includes training and offers higher pay than competitors allows us to snap up the best individuals from the local labour market.*

Like Mags, Keith saw apprentices as important for the survival of the business, he recognised a need for a regular supply of new staff. Keith saw the apprenticeship programme as a good way to recruit and train new staff and support the local economy. He commented that he had not expected that the apprentices would bring so many new ideas and learning to the business and actually improve its performance. According to Keith, the act of being interviewed had encouraged him to reflect on his experience of working with apprentices. Such insights could help other employers to understand and improve their delivery of apprenticeships.

**Kristen** was another example of a 'realist' apprentice; she had researched the apprenticeship thoroughly before starting work at a hotel in the north of England. She explained that she had clear career goals and wanted to use the apprenticeship to develop her skills and enhance her CV before moving to Europe to pursue a career in hotel

management. She realised that the apprenticeship would not provide all the skills that she needed, but she wanted to get as much out of it as she could, and was frustrated that others were not as motivated as she was:

*I wish that my managers were more interested in the training.*

Kristen (19), level 3 licensed hospitality apprentice

Kristen explained how important it was for the apprenticeship to help develop skills that improved her performance:

*[The apprenticeship] makes me better at my job and forces me to think about how I do my work and where I fit in the company.*

**Elite** (high knowledge, high expectations)

The apprenticeships within this group often included features that the apprentices felt added value to the experience; examples included rotation around business areas and a focus on each individual's progression. Elite apprentices really felt that they were valued as vital to the future success of the business, rather than the current success. They all had development plans that showed how their objectives fitted with corporate goals. Interviews highlighted the way apprentices, employers and training providers can work together to deliver a tailored apprenticeship that is embedded within the employer's structure, creating a learning culture (Hodkinson et al., 2007). The employers were engaged with the detail of the apprenticeship, usually working closely with the training provider to ensure that the content was relevant and delivered in a way that ensured that theory and practice supported each other. One example was **Mo**:



*As an apprentice here we get treated really well. I have been in the company magazine twice. When I left uni, I felt like a failure. Here I have my photo in reception...everyone knows me, all the department heads want me to come and work with them.*

Mo (21), level 3 information technology apprentice

Mo left school at 18 and began a degree in physics. The course was not what he had expected; he struggled with the advanced mathematics and left before the end of the first year. A friend was just about to complete an apprenticeship at a large business services company, ServCo, and helped Mo with his application for the next apprentice cohort. Mo was in the same cohort as Nick. When I interviewed Mo, he had completed a year of his apprenticeship, but unlike Nick, Mo seemed to be thriving. Mo spent the first two months of the apprenticeship in college full-time, but when I interviewed him, he was attending college once a week. When I asked Mo what support he had been given during the apprenticeship, he explained that the company has a chatroom to allow apprentices to network, and he showed me his personalised development plan (PDP) and explained how it linked his learning progress to the company's values and objectives. He described how:

*Apprentices move around departments, yeah, to give us an overview of the business...and what I learn is relevant to different parts of the job. The PDP explains it, see?*

Through careful analysis of the data, I was able to compare the experiences of Mo and Nick. My findings illustrated how different individuals can experience the same apprenticeship in very different ways. The childcare apprentices, Keeley and Jade, also had completely different reactions, and different outcomes despite receiving similar training and support.

Also from ServCo, but taking a customer services apprenticeship, **Yasmin** gave a different perspective of the experience of being an elite apprentice:

*I feel that it is my job to get the most that I possibly can out of the opportunity I have...In some ways they make it easy because you get all this help and resources, but I know I am constantly being watched and monitored.*

Yasmin (21), level 3 customer service apprentice

Apprentices at ServCo are set challenges involving using their learning to solve real business problems. This is expansive behaviour, because it helps develop both individual and organisational capability (Fuller and Unwin, 2010). Yasmin felt that the challenges and stretch offered by her apprenticeship were helping her to develop and showcase her skills. She had just returned from a four-week placement at ServCo's office in France and the experience demonstrated the confidence that the organisation had in her, and had given her a huge amount of confidence:

*They don't usually let apprentices go to the overseas offices, but when they needed someone I volunteered. It was just too good a chance to pass up.*

The matrix model was useful in explaining how my findings link to the literature, and in particular the theories around agency and power. I found that apprentices with lower expectations tend to see their employer or training provider as being responsible for the quality of the training. Those with neutral expectations understood that a range of factors can affect quality. Apprentices with really high expectations were able to judge the contributions of others to the quality of the apprenticeship, but generally felt a high level of personal responsibility for their own success.

There was a huge variation in terms of the level of knowledge that the apprentices had when commencing their apprenticeship. The apprentices who really understood what was involved were in sectors where apprenticeships were common or had been provided with a comprehensive induction from their employer and/or training provider. Some had attempted to do their own research, but this had seldom provided all the information that they needed. Most of the apprentices described advice from schools as poor, negative, biased or non-existent, supporting findings from Ofsted (2013a). My findings suggested that many apprentices struggle to find good independent information about apprenticeships. The impact of this can be that they are very reliant on those with a vested interest. In Sara's case, the training provider was able to dictate the content and delivery of the training. Literature shows that marketing approaches from apprenticeship training providers are common (Wolf, 2011, p. 125), and can result in a lack of employer engagement in the delivery of the programme (Higton et al., 2013, p. 77).

When I returned to re-interview Sara 15 months later, she explained that participating in the research had had an impact. The interviews had triggered honest discussions with Alan and Jo, which in turn led to them demanding more information and support from the training provider. The act of participating in the study may have caused participants to challenge the status quo and create new interpretations (Mezirow, 1990, p. 5), thus the research may have become an act of social constructivism and co-creation (Atkins, 2013, p. 144). By asking whether her experience was 'normal', Sara was reflecting on her apprenticeship in a way that would not have happened, had it not been for my intervention. As Sara described it:

*Everyone upped their game, including me...The work and the qualification stopped feeling like completely separate things and suddenly it all began to make sense.*

Collecting evidence from individual apprentices highlights their different personalities and priorities, something that literature and policy have largely ignored, but which is exposed when examined through a lens of social construction theory. The implication is that support needs to be tailored to individual apprentices, and my matrix, developed as a result of a careful analysis of the experiences of apprentices, could be a good starting point to understanding each apprentice's needs.

## **5.2 Significance and use of my matrix**

I found that a major complaint from apprentices and their employers related to a gap between expectations and reality. I have shown, however, that apprentices can feel that there is too much challenge or too little, or that the pace of training is too fast or too slow. My findings also show that problems often stem from particular relationships between the partners within an apprenticeship, and poor communication can often be at the centre of unmet expectations. For the best employers and training providers, apprentices will already be at the centre of the design and delivery of their apprenticeships, but for others it will require new ways of thinking and working. My matrix model (Figure 8) demonstrates how the apprentices' backgrounds and habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133), combined with prior knowledge about the apprenticeship, affects expectations. I believe that this is the first time that research has investigated and theorised the experience of apprentices in this way, and I believe that it will be useful to those who are involved in

apprenticeship policy, design or delivery to understand the importance of managing the expectations of individual apprentices.

The model could be developed into an analytical tool, and used at the start of the apprenticeship to help apprentice, employer and training provider understand the apprentice's prior experiences and future aspirations. Most training providers undertake a skills analysis at the start of each apprenticeship to help understand the apprentice's skills gaps and decide how to prioritise training, but they may not spend much time looking at other aspects of the apprentices' needs. A brief analysis of the apprentice's past learning, experience of work, pastoral needs, career and life goals would reduce the chances of frustration and failure for the apprentice, employer and training provider. A support-needs analysis tool could be used to develop a customised apprenticeship programme to help the apprentice to develop skills and to assimilate into work. The matrix is, of course, a simplified model of reality, and as I have shown, individual apprentices within each of the nine boxes will have different needs, but the matrix could help to focus resource and improve the chances of success.

By analysing my findings, I was able to conclude that high expectations usually coincided with high levels of motivation and trust, so apprentices to the right side of the matrix will benefit from apprenticeships with a high level of self-direction, designed to take advantage of motivated individuals. 'Elite' apprentices are likely to need an apprenticeship that will stretch them, combined with clear and ambitious career goals. Those to the left of the matrix may need a more structured programme with more direction and more frequent

contact with the training provider and line manager; for example, 'conveyor belt' apprentices need to feel that their goals are realistic and achievable for them, and they may need some flexibility to adapt their pace of learning and work, speeding up, or pausing their studies if necessary. This would have helped Nick, where the expectations of his employer and training provider exceeded what he was comfortable with. Naïve apprentices such as Jon, would benefit from a longer induction to provide additional information about the apprenticeship. Apprentices like Henry could benefit from additional pastoral support to help them deal with complex home lives, so they are able to focus on learning. Having access to this additional intelligence about each apprentice would promote apprenticeships on the expansive end of Fuller and Unwin's continuum by ensuring that no apprentice is viewed as an empty vessel, by providing a greater interaction between apprentice, employer and training provider, and greater integration of training and work.

The matrix would need to be tested in practice, using a lot more apprentices, and may need to be adapted as a result. It is possible that some of the labels do not work when applied more generally. There are also a few unexpected findings that might require more analysis; for example, where a lack of knowledge was matched with high expectations, in the case of Jon, and where apprentices made an informed decision to tolerate a poor experience in order to achieve their longer-term goals, in the case of Keeley. My findings showed the importance of understanding and managing the apprentice's expectations, in order to improve the way that the programme is experienced. The model could be used to benchmark apprentices when they start their apprenticeship, and then again later on to test

whether any changes to their levels of knowledge and expectations could be linked to specific interventions such as induction and mentoring.

The matrix could also be used by apprentices themselves, to help them to make sense of their experience. Apprenticeships are, by definition, more than mere learning programmes, and by encouraging apprentices to think more critically and to engage with others, it seems possible that quality apprenticeships have the potential to transform individuals (Mezirow, 2000). Such a transformation could manifest in how apprentices see themselves, relate to others, and engage in the wider community (Cranton, 2006, p. 48), helping individuals 'to become everything that one is capable of becoming' (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). It is, however, important to note the voice of sceptics who caution against getting swept up in the rhetoric of transformational learning (Newman, 2012), but opportunities such as WorldSkills competitions have shown how apprentices from all backgrounds can flourish with the right motivation and support (Chankseliani et al., 2016, p. 594).

Re-interviewing Sara allowed me to witness her 'maturation' as she grew in confidence and competence (Fuller and Unwin, 2009, p. 410). Alan and Jo had encouraged Sara to apply what she learned and she was given autonomy to implement changes to the business. Having completed her apprenticeship, Sara had been promoted, and was thriving in her new role as office manager. The business now has an additional two staff members and is planning to recruit its second apprentice.

My evidence showed that apprentices are able to engage in the active construction of knowledge (Billett, 2016a, pp. 618-9). Apprentices who were better informed about the content and design of the programme, and particularly those who had had an input, were also able to continuously evaluate their learning, and the impact of the programme. They were able to decide for themselves what is relevant, or high quality, and they were able to articulate what success meant for them as learners and as employees. Those who identified with low expectations were generally more limited to talking about specific issues and frustrations, but this is still valuable data, supporting a better understanding of apprenticeship quality. Similarly, apprentices with more detailed knowledge about the programme were able to think objectively about the success of the apprenticeship programme more generally, whilst those with the least knowledge could give subjective examples of poor policy and practice. It is important that apprentices' views are fed back into the system in order to underpin improvements to the programme and the matrix. It is also important to check with apprentices on the impact of changes to policy and practice, in particular those that directly impact the apprentices.

Interviewing apprentices was interesting to me as a practitioner researcher. My job as a policy official usually focuses on the positive aspects of apprenticeships. Similarly, when I go into schools and colleges during careers events, I am promoting the benefits of apprenticeships. The apprentices that I interviewed for this study have forced me to reconsider my approach to my job and volunteering. As a result, I am trying to be more empathic, by thinking about the way that different young people with different habitus



perceive apprenticeships. I can now ask myself, ‘what would Yasmin, Jade or Henry make of this?’, or even better, I can ask other apprentices.

### 5.3 Discussion of other findings

In the title of this research, I raised the question of ‘normality’ within apprenticeships. One of my main findings was the heterogeneity of the experiences of apprentices that I interviewed, indicating that there is no such thing as a ‘normal apprentice’ and no single problem or solution. My study revealed considerable variety in the way that apprenticeships are ‘done’; how the work element is organised and how the training element is delivered. Policy is often based on an assumption that there is some degree of normality, and focuses on the imagined needs of the ‘normal apprentice’ undertaking a ‘normal apprenticeship’. Insufficient effort is made to test this with apprentices themselves.

The IfATE’s quality statement summarised the needs of apprentices as:

*...to achieve competence in a skilled occupation, which is transferable and secures long term earnings potential, greater security and the capability to progress in the workplace.*

IfA, 2017e

The statement also provides a set of quantifiable indicators to measure the quality of training and outcomes for apprentices:

- *Retention up to sign-off for end point assessment*
- *Ratio of entry to success (including grades) in end-point assessment*
- *Destinations in employment in the apprenticeship occupation (with the training employer or with a different employer)*
- *Attainment of a higher level educationally and/or occupationally within 3 and 5 years of completion*
- *Ofsted overall and apprenticeship grades/HEFCE (OfS) judgements*

IfA, 2017e

As I have previously argued, data alone will not explain whether an apprenticeship has been successful and will do nothing to explain how to improve quality. The apprentices who participated in my study valued transferable skills, job security and longer-term progression, but fair treatment at work, the relevance and reliability of training, and intrinsic job satisfaction were equally valued. These are things that the quantitative measures of success within the quality statement, such as retention rates and Ofsted ratings, will not measure. Rather than asking whether particular practices are 'normal', apprentices should be asking whether practices are 'fair, helpful or legitimate?' It is these questions that are at the heart of a quality apprenticeship programme.

Research question 3 was about the relationship between the apprentice, employer and training provider and my findings showed the complex power dynamics (Raven, 2008). My results included examples of apprentices who did not have any idea what their employer thought about their performance at work, and examples of employers who were unsure about the service that they were receiving from the training provider, but were not sure whether or not they could or should complain or challenge the status quo. Some of the training providers expressed frustration with having to act as intermediaries between employer and apprentice to facilitate resolutions to what should be general employment issues. None of the partners had an effective way to measure quality or any sense of a benchmark for performance. The Commitment Statement (Skills Funding Agency, 2016, p. 30), introduced by the government to set out and manage expectations was not working for the participants that I interviewed, because none of the partners seemed to feel any

ownership of it. An impersonal mandatory statement was not a substitute for good and continuous communication.

My findings showed how important the socio-cultural aspects of an apprenticeship are to the overall experience. Apprentices who described their experience most positively used words such as ‘partnership’, ‘trust’ and ‘integration’ when describing the relationship between delivery partners, and they spoke of shared visions, constant communication, constructive feedback and common goals. The apprentices revealed specific things that employers and training providers can do that improve the quality of the apprenticeship. For employers, the clear message was about working closely with the training provider to understand the contents of the training programme, and discussing how they can ensure that on- and off-the-job training really support each other. The employer can also help identify opportunities for the apprentice to integrate learning. Apprentices wanted more regular discussions about their progress and possible career path, and they wanted employers to enable them to network internally. Few were aware of the existence of wider communities of practice. Apprentices want to be treated as members of the team at work, although they also wanted colleagues to understand the training that they do.

An analysis of the apprentices’ comments showed that many of the measures that Fuller and Unwin associated with an expansive apprenticeship (Table 4) were important to apprentices. This included the alignment between the goals of the individual and the organisation, and a shared post-apprenticeship vision between workplace and provider, but I also found that it is important to consider the apprentice’s aspirations within that vision.

The continuum states that an expansive (good quality) apprenticeship allows the apprentice to gradually become more productive, however, the apprentices that I interviewed expressed mixed views on whether or not a gradual transition is a good thing:

*The two months were actually quite boring, you know, it was all theory then they gave us a big induction and stuff, but I couldn't wait to just get on with the job.*

Nick (23), level 3 information technology apprentice

My research also highlighted some areas that Fuller and Unwin's model neglects. Firstly, although the continuum does consider the needs of the apprentice it does so from the outside, rather than from the perspective of the apprentices themselves. The continuum prioritises the actions and views of employer and training provider, so could not be used as the primary tool to evaluate the experience of apprentices. The continuum largely treats apprentices as passive recipients of training and ignores the idea of their agency or self-efficacy; how much they can influence their own opportunities and success (Schoon, 2018; Grier-Reed and Skaar, 2010, p. 43). My research found that apprentices themselves have a considerable ability to influence the quality of their apprenticeships (Hodkinson et al., 1996), some apprentices explained how they were proactive in engaging their managers and took the lead in liaising between the employer and training provider. These apprentices were quick to spot when something was not working and researched information, or initiated discussions or changes themselves. Both Yasmin and Sara demonstrated that the attitude and approach of apprentices themselves can influence the expansiveness of the apprenticeship. I found that apprentices with greater cultural capital tended to be better informed, more confident and determined, and more likely to express positive views about the success of their apprenticeships.

It is helpful that the Framework is presented as a continuum because, as my findings showed, it is possible for apprenticeships to fall between the two extremes; for example, Mo experienced an apprenticeship as expansive, whereas Nick felt restricted by the same apprenticeship. Sara experienced her apprenticeship move from restrictive to expansive as she and her employers began to understand the potential of the apprenticeship programme. The continuum does not mention several of the features that the apprentices who took part in my study felt were essential for a successful apprenticeship, such as better information in the form of an induction programme, a mentor that they could confide in, and decent pay and conditions. The apprentices were able to construct an alternative notion of success that goes beyond the official one and is meaningful to them. Finally, my findings showed that it is possible for apprentices to progress and report satisfaction within a restrictive regime:

*I know that if I can just keep my head down, do what I'm told and get all my units done like I did with my level 2, I will get my qualifications and then I will be able to work anywhere. And that's all I want.*

Jade (20), level 3 children & young people's workforce apprentice

Or to be frustrated by an expansive one:

*I know [my line manager] is trying to stretch me and encourage me to try different jobs in the company, but to be honest I like this job and I'd rather just focus on that so I'm really hoping that they don't rotate me again.*

Nick (23), level 3 information technology apprentice

I have suggested additions to the continuum (Table 11) as a result of my findings. This could give the continuum a greater relevance to apprentices themselves and could improve institutional practice, giving employers and training providers a common language and set

of concepts to work to as they explore these issues, in order to ensure that the apprenticeships that they deliver better meet the needs of their apprentices.



	EXPANSIVE	RESTRICTIVE
C1	Apprenticeship is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the individual and organisational capability. <b>Apprentice develops a range of organisation/job-specific and transferable skills</b>	Apprenticeship is used to tailor individual capability to organisational need
C2	Workplace and provider <b>and apprentice</b> share a post-Apprenticeship vision: progression for career. <b>The apprentice is encouraged to take responsibility for managing own learning and development.</b>	Post-Apprenticeship vision: static for job
C3	Apprentice has dual status as learner and employee: explicit recognition of, and support for, apprentice's status as learner, <b>recognising that some apprentices will place more value on one status over the other</b>	Status as employee dominates: status as learner restricted to minimum required to meet Apprenticeships Framework
C4	Apprentice makes a gradual transition to productive worker and expertise in occupational field. <b>The apprentice sets the pace of the transition so the apprentice feels neither 'bored' nor 'thrown in at the deep end'</b>	Fast transition to productive worker with limited knowledge of occupational field; or existing, already productive, workers as apprentices with minimal development
C5	Apprentice is treated as a member of an occupational and workplace community with access to the community's rules, history, knowledge and practical expertise <b>and not seen as a 'unit of labour'</b>	Apprentice treated as extra pair of hands who only needs access to limited knowledge and skills to perform job
C6	Apprentice <b>encouraged to</b> participates in different communities of practice inside and outside the workplace <b>and not seen as a 'unit of labour'</b>	Participation restricted to narrowly defined job role and work station
C7	Workplace maps everyday work tasks against qualification requirements – qualification valued as adds extra skills and knowledge to immediate job requirements. <b>Apprentice has regular discussion with manager/colleagues about apprenticeship content and opportunities are created within the workplace to ensure the apprentice gains a breadth of experience</b>	Weak relationship between workplace tasks and qualifications – no recognition for skills and knowledge acquired beyond immediate work tasks

	EXPANSIVE	RESTRICTIVE
C8	<b><i>Apprentice has regular discussion with manager about progress and any additional learning and development needs.</i></b> Qualifications develop knowledge for progression to next Level and platform for further education	Qualifications accredit limited range of on the job competence
C9	Apprentice has planned time off the job for study and to gain wider perspective. <b><i>Employer demonstrates the importance of the learning and an interest in the content of the apprenticeship</i></b>	Off the job simply a minor extension of on the job
C10	Apprentice's existing skills and knowledge, <b><i>and experience</i></b> recognised and valued and used as platform for new learning, <b><i>influencing the design of the job and programme of study</i></b>	Apprentices regarded as 'blank sheets' or 'empty vessels'
C11	<b><i>Apprentice has regular discussion with manager and assessor/tutor to monitor progress and provide support.</i></b> Apprentice's progress closely monitored and involves regular constructive feedback from range of employer and provider personnel who take a holistic approach	Apprentice's progress monitored for job performance with limited feedback – provider involvement restricted to formal assessments for qualifications unrelated to job performance
	<b><i>Apprentice has a thorough understanding of the job and training, how the two work together and the responsibilities of each party. This will usually involve a comprehensive induction programme and a commitment to the success of the apprenticeship by all parties</i></b>	<b><i>Apprentice is given minimal information on a 'need to know' basis. Little information is provided about wider context.</i></b>
	<b><i>Apprentice is supported by a mentor who can assist with any issues in confidence</i></b>	<b><i>Minimal support is provided</i></b>
	<b><i>Apprentice is treated fairly with regard to pay and working conditions</i></b>	<b><i>Apprentice is treated poorly with regard to pay and working conditions and made to feel inferior to other employees</i></b>

Table 11: How Fuller and Unwin's 'Expansive Restrictive Framework' could be adapted to take more account of the apprentices' perspectives on quality

Additional criteria to describe an expansive apprenticeship from the perspective of an apprentice have been added in bold italics.

Although the apprentices that I interviewed reported a limited knowledge about institutional practice and public policy, the two things affected their experience of the apprenticeship in a number of ways. Several apprentices reported frustration with a lack of

employer interest. Having an employer who makes an effort to understand the content of the apprenticeship and engages with the apprentice and training provider in the delivery of the training is likely to support a good experience. Similarly, training providers can support a positive experience by working with the employer to ensure the relevance of the training to current occupational practice and the apprentices' job.

Some of the apprentices described their experience in terms that suggested some kind of transformation. For some, the impact extended beyond their vocational skills and occupational competence, helping them to become more rounded as individuals and as citizens:

*I've made loads of friends on the apprenticeship and I'm much more independent.*

Trinny (17), level 2 business administration apprentice

*I've got a pension and I've just bought a flat, how many people can do that at my age?*

Chloe (24), level 3 marketing apprentice

*I never voted before I did the apprenticeship, I never saw the point, but we discuss...how politics...affects your pay and the work. So now I vote, even in the local elections.*

Rob (24), level 3 construction building apprentice

Taking a narrow view of apprenticeships as a means of addressing skills gaps and of apprentices as units of labour is a serious underestimation of the programme's transformational potential (Billett, 2016b). Similarly, attempts to measure the quality of apprenticeships solely by reference to completion rates and economic returns will never capture the true personal and societal value of apprenticeships.



The apprentices that took part in this research highlighted the fact that, for them, an apprenticeship is not merely or even primarily, a learning intervention. Apprenticeships combine work, learning, and for the young apprentices that took part in this study, a period of personal maturation. Apprenticeship reforms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have focused on the design and content of the programme, with little attention given to improving the way that apprenticeships are delivered or understood (DBIS, 2013). The way the government has chosen to measure quality and success has covered both work and learning, but has usually been limited to rather superficial quantitative measures, such as crude satisfaction scores, completion rates and complaints against the training provider, increased salary for the apprentice and return on investment for the employer. For the majority of apprentices interviewed for this research study, the main measure of success is that the apprenticeship leads to long-term job satisfaction, security and respect:

*The training – it was good, well mostly good, but look, I’ve got a job that I like and well...the future, yeah, well I’m optimistic that the future will be good for me workwise. Long term, once I’ve got my certificate and everything...I think I will do really well here.*

Will (18), level 2 business administration apprentice

#### **5.4 Addressing the research aims and questions**

Previously, very little was known about what it felt like to be an apprentice, so my research has started to fill a gap in existing knowledge and has shown that the experience of each apprentice is unique. I have also shown that apprentices can tell us a great deal about policy and practice. The use of vignettes and direct quotations attaches real significance to the apprentices’ own descriptions of their experiences. All of the participants felt that the

experience of apprenticeship had made a difference to them. For some it was simply a case of securing a job, for others it was about the development of new skills and a chance to progress their careers; but for some the experience had transformed them; they described the discovery of new talents and aptitudes, new perspectives on learning or life, and most significantly, increased confidence and self-worth. Unfortunately, almost every apprentice also explained that their experience had contained episodes of confusion and frustration, and often these involved issues with the quality of delivery such as the reliability of assessor/trainers, or a perceived lack of interest from the employer. I believe that this study could act as a challenge to policy makers by acknowledging that the views of apprentices have largely been ignored and suggesting better ways to collect views and incorporate them into policy decisions.

As I interviewed apprentices, I was surprised about the lack of control expressed by many of them. Careers advice is often based on an assumption that all young people have a genuine choice in shaping their future learning and career paths (Hodkinson, 2008, p. 4). Rather than moving seamlessly from school to work, the young people that I interviewed, like Sara, had often experienced multiple 'false starts' including periods of economic and learning inactivity (Quintini and Martin, 2006, p. 13). Many of my research participants had postponed decisions about their futures, either because their schools or parents pressured them to continue with a traditional academic route, because they did not know what they wanted to do, or because they simply did not know where to start (Ball et al., 2000, p. 110; Hodkinson et al., 1996, pp. 49-50). False starts and delays mean that apprentices come from a range of different backgrounds, with a range of different expectations, experiences

and 'baggage'. Some, like Angel and Keeley, described negative experiences of school, resulting in 'weak learner identities' (Lawson, 2014, p. 344). For many of the apprentices that I interviewed, starting an apprenticeship had not involved an informed choice; it was hardly surprising, therefore, that they had few or only partially formed expectations about the programme.

Some of the employers that I interviewed had no experience of employing an apprentice and very little knowledge to guide them and, as a result, both the apprentices and their employers said that they relied very heavily on the training provider for information and direction about the apprenticeship and how it should be delivered. This reliance on the training provider had an impact on the way the apprenticeship was experienced; for example, apprentices who sensed problems with the quality of their apprenticeship did not feel sufficiently well-informed or empowered to challenge this, leaving them feeling frustrated:

*For the first three months of my apprenticeship I didn't get any training...I mean that can't be right, can it? But what could I do?*

Sara (22), level 3 business administration apprentice

Most of the apprentices felt that their confidence had increased or was increasing as a result of the apprenticeship. This was particularly obvious from those apprentices that I interviewed for a second time. A comparison of the words used during both sets of interviews showed that they were more definite in their views, any criticism was better articulated and more constructive, they had clearer future plans and they were also far more reflective about their learning and progress. Apprentices who were nearer the end of

their apprenticeships said they were also more confident and independent than they had been at the start.

It was important to me that the research methodology used supported the central tenet of the project: the primacy of the apprentice voice, and I believe that it did. Interviews generated a wealth of direct comments that have been used to provide richness and authenticity to this thesis. Quotations from apprentices provided the main source of primary evidence within this research and I have used them throughout the thesis to illustrate important points. The use of quotations from apprentices allows the reader to ‘hear’ the accounts and opinions of apprentices as directly as possible. Through careful choice of research methods and the focus on the learner voice, this research has moved the apprentices from mere subjects of research, to participants in the full sense of the word. Some of the apprentices expressed the feeling that this research was important to them:

*So this...what I say today could actually change things for the next lot of apprentices? I like that. I want to be part of that.*

Angel (20), Level 2 retail apprentice

The research methodology involved spending time with each apprentice in order to understand their experiences and views. The research, comprising in-depth interviews and the production of vignettes provided the opportunity to bring to life the apprentices’ journeys in a way that other possible methods, such as questionnaires or observations would not have allowed. I did not produce vignettes for every apprentice that I interviewed, because I wanted to focus on specific aspects of certain apprentices’ stories in order to illustrate key themes and theories. The experiences of all 33 apprentices fed into my analysis, contributed to my understanding of the apprentice experience, and the

conclusions that I reached. Re-interviewing three of the apprentices several months after the initial interview was particularly insightful because the apprentices had had the chance to reflect on their own experiences. The apprentices who were interviewed for a second time were more alert to any factors that might affect the quality of their apprenticeship experience during the intervening months. These apprentices were able to articulate their reflections with clarity, and in considerable detail during the subsequent interview:

*...suddenly it all began to make sense.*

Sara (23), level 3 business administration apprentice

### **5.5 Limitations of the study**

Although thirty-three interviews is a lot for a doctoral research project, the statistical significance is far too low to allow the generalisability of the results. In addition, participants were not randomly chosen, because the study focused on specific apprentices in terms of their age and the types of apprenticeship programme that they were on. This has been explained through the participant inclusion and exclusion criteria within the methods chapter (Table 6), and within the data analysis section. It is important to remember that the views of older apprentices and those on higher level or less popular apprenticeships have not been captured. Future research could address this, either through studies that focus on other types of apprentices, or by research on all apprentices. It was also too early to address the impact of the recent Richard reforms on the experience of apprentices, but future studies could include this.

This study did not focus on under-represented or disadvantaged groups, although several of the apprentices that I interviewed were from ethnic minority backgrounds or had

disabilities. Williams et al. (2013) provided a very detailed analysis of differences between the uses of apprenticeships by particular groups of learners. They found that female apprentices tend to be older and more likely to opt for apprenticeships in the lower-paid and traditionally female occupations, such as care and hairdressing (Williams et al., 2013, pp. 30, 36, 42). The authors did not focus on the experience of apprentices and further research could compare the experiences of female and male apprentices, disabled and non-disabled apprentices, older and younger apprentices. My study did not investigate whether different factors are more or less relevant to success for 16-18, 19-24-year-old and older apprentices, but it could be expanded to do so in the future.

In this chapter I have shown how my research can be used to fill gaps in our knowledge of the experience of apprentices, including their views on quality and success. I have explained how the matrix model that I developed from my findings could be used to help make sense of the experience of apprentices, and how it could support improvements in the way that the quality of apprenticeships is understood and delivered. In the next chapter, I draw out the main conclusions from my research and make recommendations to improve policy and practice. I reflect on my research journey, provide ideas for future research and explain my plans to disseminate the findings.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I draw out the main conclusions from my research and make recommendations to improve policy and practice. I reflect on my research journey and provide ideas for future research that could build on this study. Finally, I explain how my research is already having an impact on policy and practice and my plans to disseminate the findings to a wider audience.

### 6.1 Conclusions

#### **i) The impact of sociocultural backgrounds and relationships within apprenticeships is significant and distinct from other types of learning**

The particular relationships and how they operate within apprenticeships are unique, because of the apprentice's dual role as employee and learner. Every apprentice is engaged in a unique and evolving negotiation of position and power with the employer and training provider. I have shown how some apprentices feel in control of their own training, either because they are by nature proactive, or because they are encouraged to take responsibility, whilst other apprentices are less able to be active participants, because they feel powerless, isolated and disenfranchised. I found that recent reforms such as the introduction of the levy have made some employers more interested in the detail of the learning, whilst others such as Christophe still feel that this is best left to the training provider. The role of the training provider is also changing (ESFA, 2018b; DBIS, 2015a, p. 22), creating a need to adapt, and develop new skills and new ways of relating to the apprentice and employer. The majority of apprentices reported an absence of strong ties to

a community identity as learners and apprentices. Brockmann (2012) and Chan (2011, p. 13) both found that feeling part of a community is an effective way to support work-related learning, and to help new workers to assimilate into their careers, but most of the apprentices that took part in my study had not accessed such communities.

The development of my knowledge/expectations matrix (Figure 8) helped me to create meaning and order from the accounts of diverse experiences. Apprentices started out with different sets of expectations about what the apprenticeship would be like and what it would offer them. My findings suggest that each apprentice's habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133), the result of various social, cultural and educational experiences, shaped the way they perceived and experienced their apprenticeship. It became clear that the meanings of quality and success are subjective and that by using the matrix to help understand each apprentice's needs, support could be tailored for individuals. Attempts to improve the quality of apprenticeships often ignore diversity, or try to control it through rules and regulations, and such attempts are unlikely to work. Improving the quality of apprenticeships requires a more holistic view of the programme, and in particular the relationship between the apprentice, employer and training provider.

## **ii) Apprenticeships need to be understood as a model of learning and transformation rather than education or labour**

The apprenticeship model is distinct from other forms of education and learning; I found that apprentices did not readily identify as a particular 'cohort' of learners, either because they felt isolated from other apprentices, identified more as employees, or simply rejected



the label 'apprentice'. Many of the study's participants believed that apprentices have a lower status than other types of learner or employee, and some tackled the issue of parity of esteem by simply not identifying themselves as apprentices.

The review of the literature showed how apprenticeships are generally conceived of, either as an economic activity designed to address national or local skills gaps, or as an educational programme acting as an alternative to college or university. Taking either view ignores the interplay between work and learning that is an essential element of successful apprenticeships (Wolf, 2011). Conceptualising an apprenticeship as a tool for developing competence for the apprentice and the business helps partners to understand the need for the content of the apprenticeship to be directly and immediately relevant to the apprentice's employment, and for the delivery of the apprenticeship to be compatible with the apprentice's working pattern, but it may miss the opportunity to develop broader skills such as adaptability (Billett, 2016b, p. 200). Some of the most common and pressing complaints from the apprentices related to ineffective use of their time, this included learning that they considered irrelevant and wasted and cancelled appointments. My findings showed that for apprenticeships to support individual growth and transformation, it is essential to ensure that apprentices have regular discussions about their performance, progress, learning needs, aspirations and career options. My matrix could provide a model to support such discussions.

### **iii) The views of apprentices can help to improve the quality and impact of learning**

I found that asking apprentices about their experiences revealed previously undocumented problems with the programme, as well as novel and often simple solutions. Apprentices were able to give specific examples of good and poor practice in the delivery of their apprenticeships and could explain how even the best programmes could be improved.

When asked, the apprentices suggested a number of practical changes that could substantially improve the programme, such as providing a brief induction to the programme and a dedicated mentor. They were also clear that some existing measures such as the Commitment Statement are not effective, but could be improved by greater integration throughout the apprenticeship. Such insights could help those who manage policy and delivery to gain a real understanding of the social processes that affect apprentices, and how to improve those processes so they work better for the apprentices. My findings contrasted with the literature, which often assumes that apprentices have nothing to say, or that decision makers and employers already know what apprentices need or what is best for them.

Every apprentice interviewed wanted to see improvements in the quality and accessibility of information and guidance on apprenticeships and said that this must be available to all young people, particularly those considering an apprenticeship and those who have recently started an apprenticeship. A lack of accessible and reliable information is probably the biggest issue for potential future apprentices. The apprentices who took part in this research said that the careers advice they received at school or college was very poor and many said that they were told little, if anything, about apprenticeships as an option. Several

of the apprentices reported that they had felt pressured into applying for college or university courses that they did not want.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

My recommendations have a policy focus as is appropriate for a professional doctorate.

### **i) A clear purpose statement emphasising apprenticeships as a tool for learning and transformation**

Rather than ignoring or trying to control the diversity of apprenticeships, policy makers, employers and training providers could find it helpful to embrace and promote the flexibility of the programme to meet the needs of a broad group of employees and learners. This will require a paradigm shift as government policy-makers would need to stop comparing apprenticeships with other, 'tidier' forms of academic learning. Policy makers and practitioners should try to learn from, rather than seek comparisons with, apprenticeship schemes that operate in other countries. This could help ensure that the programme better reflects the needs of apprentices, as well as the labour market and employers, particularly in the context of the UK's exit from the European Union. There is a risk that attempts to use apprenticeships to solve multiple social, economic and political problems will result in a programme that fails to fully achieve any of these, and certainly one which does not serve the needs of apprentices.

Richard found that some groups were under-represented within apprenticeships and recommended that the government '*encourage diversity and innovation in delivering*

*apprenticeships'* (Richard, 2012, p.18). A more inclusive definition of an apprenticeship would remove some of the barriers identified by Richard, including '*unnecessary prescription and regulation*', and could help to address gender stereotypes, and under-representation of those from ethnic minority backgrounds, or with disabilities. An inclusive definition could allow apprentices to contribute to setting their own learning aims.

Measuring quality then becomes a matter of assessing how well each apprenticeship meets those aims. The statement could be:

*The purpose of apprenticeships is to address skills gaps by supporting individuals to achieve their learning aims and enter a trade or profession.*

**ii) A systematic approach to capturing data from apprentices rather than data about apprenticeships**

A more systematic approach is needed to capture data on the needs, expectations and experiences of apprentices and potential future apprentices. These data could provide evidence to training providers, employers and policy makers and support the development of specific indicators to measure quality against the purpose statement. A set of questions could be developed for every apprentice in England to complete at the start and end of their apprenticeship. Questions could cover topics such as the apprentice's expectations and aspirations at the start of the apprenticeship, the quality of interactions with the training provider and employer, the quality of advice, guidance and training materials, and satisfaction with feedback. As apprenticeships are part of a national policy in England, linked to legislation and public funding, it would be possible to require employers or training providers to issue the questionnaire. The data could be used locally, to help set individual learning goals and identify support needs, and to monitor progression and satisfaction.

Data could also be used nationally, to measure and improve the success of the whole programme. Over time, the country would have a comprehensive source of information to help understand the experience of apprentices, to underpin improvements wherever they are needed and to measure any changes over time.

I have emphasised the practical and policy focus of this recommendation, because this is a professional doctorate, but my suggestions are underpinned by theories of social constructivism. Building the principle of apprentice voice into apprenticeships will prevent stakeholders from simply making assumptions about what is best for apprentices. This is a key epistemological and ethical issue. Recognising the importance of apprentice voice sends an important message to apprentices that their views are relevant and valued. The process needs to avoid some of the traps that have beset learner voice in other parts of the education system; for example, collecting the opinions of apprentices must not be allowed to become a marketing tool, by simply exploiting the positive comments, or something that partners just pay 'lip service' to, by failing to analyse the results and implement findings both locally and centrally. The methods used to capture the data need to be considered carefully to make sure that all apprentices are comfortable giving honest critique without fear of reprisal.

### **iii) Provide a resource bank of reliable information and advice**

The advice and information available to apprentices is the outcome of complex social processes. None of the apprentices that I interviewed felt that the policy of delegating careers advice to schools was effective. Bringing information and support together in one

place would help young people and apprentices to find answers to their questions and know where to go for further advice. This research found that apprentices respond particularly well to advice from their peers, so apprentices could be encouraged to share their own case studies and peer guidance and support. Related to the last point, I recommend that apprentices are encouraged to be part of an active community of all apprentices, and of communities of apprentices from particular geographical regions, occupations and professions. This could be done through online networks.

### **6.3 Reflections**

Having reflected on my research, were I to start again I would make a number of changes. Firstly, although I tested my research instruments before and throughout the initial study phase of my research, I could have spent more time evolving them to ensure that all the questions could be easily understood. Some of the apprentices struggled with a few of the concepts used, such as the difference between on- and off-the-job training and the term 'mentor'. I developed a *Glossary of terms* to assist (p. 9). Every time I had to explain a concept increased my chances of unintentionally leading or influencing the apprentice's response. I learnt from this realisation and endeavoured to avoid bias, judgments or assumptions throughout the process. I found that as I conducted more interviews, my confidence grew and I relied less on my list of questions. Later interviews tended to feel more like frank discussions and I used the list of interview questions merely as a prompt to ensure that I covered all the main themes. This really helped to build trust and get interview participants to open up and provide their own views and narratives.

Secondly, I would be more rigorous and systematic in organising the interviews. To gain access and make arrangements for some of the early interview sessions during the main study I relied heavily on personal contacts who worked for training providers and colleges. Although using personal contacts made it easy to access the apprentices, my contacts tried too hard to help me, and in doing so I suspect that they 'pre-selected' and 'over-prepared' the apprentices. I felt that some of the apprentices arrived with pre-conceptions about my research and what I wanted to hear. Although the interviews still provided valuable data, these pre-conceptions were hard to shake off. During subsequent interviews, I took better control of the selection of individual apprentices. I achieved this by providing limited detail about the research to the training provider or other gatekeeper and asking them to provide a list of all learners. I was then able to filter the list by target characteristics and then select a sample in order to provide a more genuine cross-section of individuals.

On a similar note, my decision to tell interviewees during later interviews only that I was a research student, and to not mention my role as a government official was a difficult decision on ethical grounds, but I believe that it was necessary to avoid influencing responses, and imposing my views. It was important to get participants to tell me what they really thought about the apprenticeship programme, although as a researcher, I still had to interpret the data and thus, to some extent, I was imposing meaning on diverse accounts of the apprentices' experience. I gave the apprentices the chance to comment on transcripts of their interviews and a few asked to see an early draft of the thesis. This provided me with reassurance that my interpretations were correct.

## 6.4 Dissemination

There are a number of examples where my research has already had an impact. Following my recommendations, the then Skills Minister, Robert Halfon announced in December 2016 that an apprentice panel should be established by the Institute for Apprenticeships:

*The panel would be made up of apprentices from different occupations and experiences. The panel would decide for itself which issues to focus on, and it will challenge and make recommendations to the board.*

Robertson, 2016

I was given responsibility for establishing the Panel, and it was launched in 2017. I expanded its membership the following year (IfA, 2018e). My research findings were cited in the scoping document for a new DfE team set up in 2019 to focus on apprentices and on apprentice research. I believe that it is the first time that a government department has set up a team with a specific focus on apprentices. My research has been informing the work of the Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education, and members of the All Party Parliamentary Group on apprenticeships have expressed an interest in the findings of this study. An article based on this study has been published in the Association of Open University Graduates' magazine, Omega (Lawes, 2019) and I presented aspects of my work at the 2019 Journal of Vocational Education and Training (JVET) biennial conference.

## 6.5 Possible future research

A number of peer-reviewed journals specialise in vocational education and training, including the Journal of Vocational Education & Training, and Education + Training. I plan to develop my research into a paper presenting my matrix model of knowledge and expectations, and discussing how it could be applied and further developed. I would also



like to conduct further research exploring how ethnographic methodology could support better policy-making.

Data on the apprentice experience could be compared to data on other learners. For example, it would be interesting to compare the experience of degree apprentices who take their degree as part of an apprenticeship with other undergraduate and postgraduate students, to determine what is different about the degree apprenticeship. This would be particularly important as degree apprenticeships are funded by the government and employers, whilst most other degrees are funded by individual students. This would build on other research on student satisfaction, such as Woodall et al. (2014), and the growing body of research on nurse apprentices (Dean, 2017). Apprenticeships for nurses, teachers and those in the legal profession provide a new alternative to traditional routes, and it would be relatively easy to compare the alternatives to give a better understanding of where and how value is added within each type of learning programme.

An important measure of transformation is whether or not learners are able to understand what is happening in order to become self-directed learners (Rocks and Lavender, 2018, pp. 588-589). Following the progress of former apprentices in order to determine how successfully work-based learning evolves from a structured apprenticeship programme to more learner-driven continuous professional development (CPD) would make an interesting further study. The study could also explore whether former apprentices approach CPD any differently than other workers.

I have proffered a new model to help make sense of the diversity of apprentices. The model could be further developed in order to tailor support to individual apprentices' needs and improve the quality of their experience. As a policy maker, I have exposed a number of weaknesses in current policy and made practical recommendations based on empirical evidence.

In conclusion, various attempts to improve the quality of apprenticeships have largely failed to silence the critics, raise the status of the programme, or remove complexities that impact its delivery. Reforms have been directed at high level policy change, and the needs of employers. Understanding apprenticeships as a social construct, begins to expose gaps in current knowledge. Interviewing apprentices has provided valuable insights into the way that they construct quality and success within the apprenticeship, their relationships with employers and training providers, and with their own learning and employment experiences. Taking a new approach to quality from the perspective of the apprentices themselves, demonstrates the importance of the interplay between apprentice, employer and learning provider.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Richard Review Recommendations

(Richard, 2012, pp. 7-19)

*My recommendations for the future of apprenticeships in England are summarised below. It is important to stress that the different elements must be taken collectively: **they are interlinked and the system will only make sense and be deliverable if all the elements are adopted as a whole.***

**1. Apprenticeships should be redefined.** *They should be clearly targeted at those who are new to a job or role that requires sustained and substantial training. Training and accreditation of existing workers that are already fully competent in their jobs should be delivered separately; as should provision aimed primarily at supporting entry into employment. The Government should introduce a new separate work based programme to support entry into employment. This should replace some Level 2 apprenticeships.*

**2. The focus of apprenticeships should be on the outcome.** *There should be recognised industry standards at the heart of every apprenticeship. They should clearly set out what apprentices should know, and be able to do, at the end of their apprenticeship, at a high level which is meaningful and relevant for employers. These standards should form the basis of new apprenticeship qualifications, which replace apprenticeship frameworks, the current qualifications which comprise them and the current national occupational standards which underpin them. There should be just one apprenticeship qualification for each occupation associated with an apprenticeship. They should link to standards for professional registration in sectors where these exist and are well-recognised.*

**3. The Government should set up a contest for the best qualification.** *Individual employers, employer partnerships or other organisations with the relevant expertise should be invited to design and develop apprenticeship qualifications for their sectors. The selection of the 'best' qualification for an occupation should be based on Government-set criteria for identifying what good looks like. The criteria should ensure the qualification is ambitious and stretching, delivers transferrable skills and has significant buy-in amongst employers, including small ones.*

**4. The testing and validation process should be independent and genuinely respected by industry.** *The test should be holistic, at the end, and assess whether the individual is fully competent and employable, within their job and their sector. Employers should be directly involved in assessment. They must make sure that the assessment consistently tests apprentices to the standard specified in the qualification. Assessors should be entirely independent and have no incentive or disincentive related to the outcome of the assessment. The Government, a government body or regulator should approve and oversee the assessment process, or the organisations in charge of that process, in a light touch way.*

**5. All apprentices should have achieved Level 2 in English and maths before they can complete their apprenticeship.** *Maths and English taught within apprenticeships should be sufficiently functional in approach to be suitable for an apprenticeship context.*



**6. The Government should encourage diversity and innovation in delivering apprenticeships.** *There will be many paths and approaches that an apprentice can take to reach 'the standard' and we should strip out any unnecessary prescription and regulation of the process for getting there.*

**7. The Government has a role in promoting good quality delivery.** *To maximise value for learners and minimise risk of poor practice, Government should make some off-site learning and a minimum duration for apprenticeships mandatory. Government should ensure that an effective, light-touch approval process exists to confirm training organisations are providing good quality training, relevant for the sector.*

**8. Government funding must create the right incentives for apprenticeship training.** *The purchasing power for investing in apprenticeship training should lie with the employer. Government should contribute to the cost, but this should be routed via the employer, in order to ensure relevance and drive up quality. The price should be free to respond to and reflect employer demand. Government should only contribute to the cost of training that supports the apprentice in reaching the industry-agreed standard. The payment should be linked, in part, to the apprentice passing the test. A preferred approach would be to fund apprenticeships using the National Insurance or tax system – for example through a tax credit, similar to the R&D tax credit. The funding system should be kept simple and accessible, including for small firms.*

**9. Learners and employers need access to good quality information.** *Relevant government data should be made open and accessible in simple language and formats, so that companies can connect it together to generate products that present data in meaningful, innovative and accessible ways. The Government, through its own communication channels and careers advice services, should ensure that information about apprenticeships and their benefits is effectively and widely disseminated.*

**10. Government must actively boost awareness of the new apprenticeship model.** *Boosting learner and employer demand is an active responsibility of Government. Government should take an education based approach to this – enabling a wider range of employers to learn how to take on apprentices and why it's worthwhile. New ways to bring employers and prospective learners together should be promoted, including through an 'apprenticeship milk round'. More effort should be made to ensure that schools and teachers, parents and all those who inform and guide young people have a better understanding of what a high quality apprenticeship can offer.*

## Appendix B: Qualification Levels

Based on Qualifications can cross boundaries (Ofqual et al., 2011)

Main stages of education/employment	Level	Qualifications and Credit Framework/ National Qualifications Framework for England and Northern Ireland	Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
Professional or postgraduate education, research or employment	8	Vocational Qualifications Level 8	Doctoral Degrees
	7	Fellowships, NVQ Level 5, Vocational Qualifications Level 7	Master's Degrees, Integrated Master's Degrees, Postgraduate Diplomas, Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), Postgraduate Certificates
Higher education Advanced skills training	6	Vocational Qualifications Level 6	Bachelor's Degrees with Honours, Bachelor's Degrees, Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), Graduate Diplomas, Graduate Certificates
Entry to professional graduate employment			
Specialised education and training	5	NVQ Level 4, Higher National Diplomas (HND), Vocational Qualifications Level 5	Foundation Degrees, Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE), Higher National Diplomas (HND)
Qualified/Skilled worker Entry to higher education	4	Vocational Qualifications Level 4, Higher National Certificates (HNC)	Higher National Certificates (HNC), Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)
	3	NVQ Level 3, Vocational Qualifications Level 3, GCE AS and A Level, Advanced Diplomas (England)	
Progression to skilled employment. Continuation of secondary education.	2	NVQ Level 2, Vocational Qualifications Level 2, GCSEs at grade A*–C, ESOL	

<p>Secondary education. Initial entry into employment or further education</p> <p>Qualifications can be taken at any age in order to continue or return to education or training</p>		<p>skills for life, Higher Diplomas (England), functional skills Level 2 (England) (English, mathematics &amp; ICT), Essential Skills Qualifications (NI)</p>	
	1	<p>NVQ Level 1, Vocational Qualifications, Level 1, GCSEs at grade D–G, ESOL skills for life, Foundation Diplomas (England), functional skills Level 1 (England) (English, mathematics &amp; ICT), Essential Skills Qualifications (NI)</p>	
	Entry Level	<p>Entry Level Certificates (sub levels 1–3), ESOL skills for life, functional skills Entry Level (England) (English, mathematics &amp; ICT), Essential Skills Qualifications (NI)</p>	

## Appendix C: Literature Search Terms

Key Words and Phrases used for Literature Search

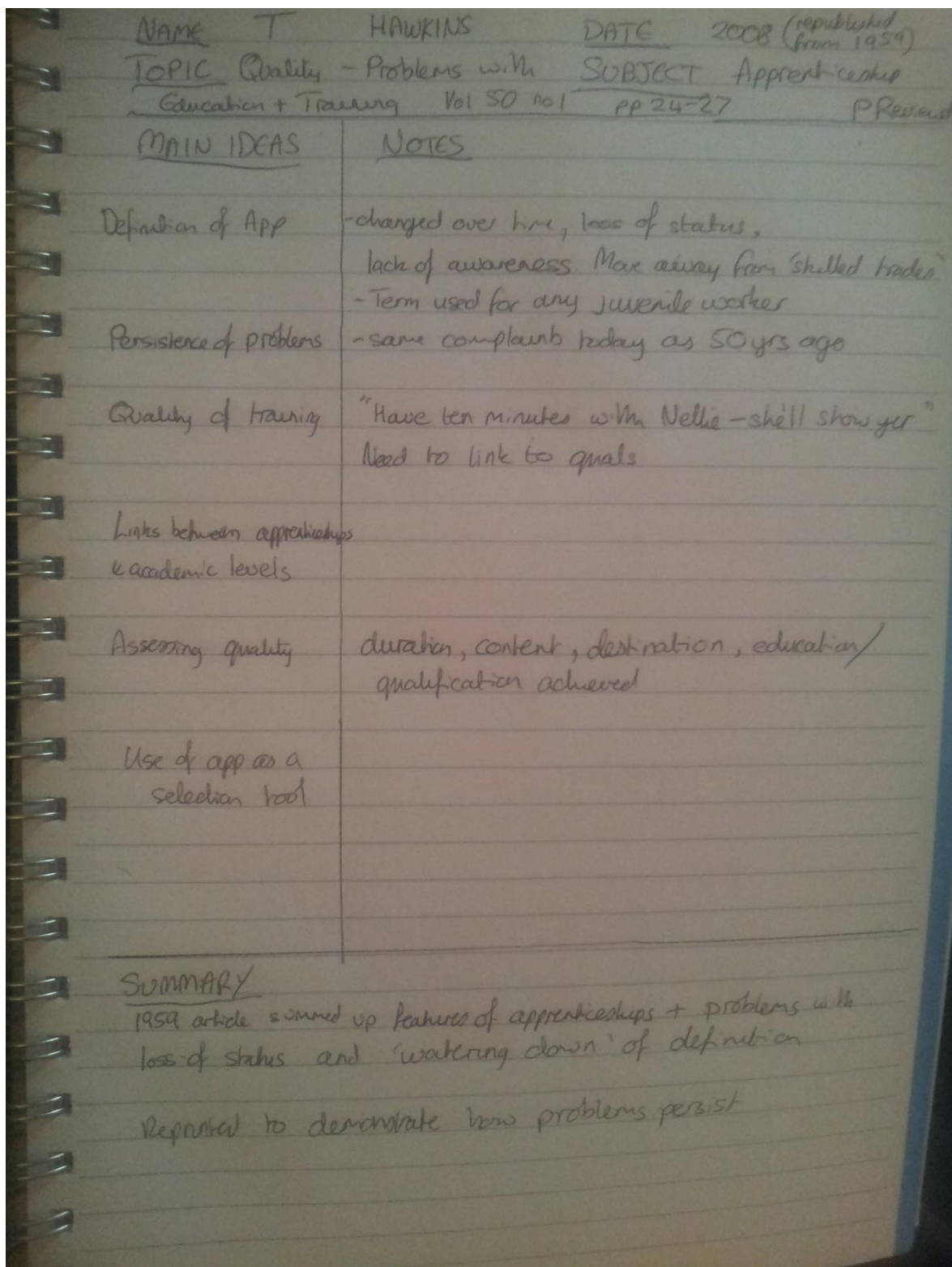
Key Words	Secondary tem (+)
Apprentice/Apprenticeship	Completion Criticism Definition Drop out Employer Experience Identity Master Mentor Policy Power Quality Reform Research Review Skills shortage Social mobility Success Support Survey Training Voice Workplace
Community	Occupational Of practice Professional
Research	Ethnographic Interview Oral Qualitative
Learner	Agency Customer Identity Power Research Survey Voice
Learning	Domains Partner Social Types

	Vocational
Social construct	
Sociocultural	
Training	Skills
Youth employment	NEETs

### Excluded lines of inquiry

Excluded theme	Reason for exclusion
Adult apprenticeship	Out of scope for this study
Adult education	Too broad
Apprentice assessment	Out of scope for this study
Apprentice pay	Out of scope for this study
Careers advice	Change of focus for study
Degree apprenticeship	Out of scope for this study
Disability	Out of scope for this study
Diversity	Out of scope for this study
Ethnicity	Out of scope for this study
Gender	Out of scope for this study
High level apprenticeship	Out of scope for this study
Vocational education	Too broad
Workplace learning	Too broad
Work-based learning	Too broad
Youth transition	Change of focus for study
Youth choice	Change of focus for study

**Appendix D: Example of Research Diary Entry**



## **Appendix E: Information Sheet and Consent Form**

My name is Tanya Lawes and I am a research student at the Open University studying for a Doctorate in Education. My research is about the experience of doing an apprenticeship. I will be very grateful if you will help my research by agreeing to be interviewed. I will record the interview because I will need to refer back to your ideas and thoughts. You don't need to do any preparation; you just need to tell me what you think about things. You will have the chance to see the transcript of the interview and to suggest changes if you are not happy with anything. The interview will last approximately one hour and I will agree a convenient time and location with you.

I will be asking you about particular problems that young people can face when they start an apprenticeship and the sort of support they get from the employer and training provider. You do not need to answer any question that you do not want to. I will not use your real name in my research or the names of your employer or training provider. I will keep any information about you or others (including your organisation) secure and will follow the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts. I will keep your information confidential. I will not tell other people (such as your employer) what you have said. I will need to share information with staff at the Open University, but they will not share it. I will write about it in my thesis, but no one will be able to tell it is about you.

You can change your mind about being part of the research at any time until January 2018 when I start to write up my final thesis. If you do change your mind, I will remove all data relating to you from my research.

I will answer any questions you have about the research. I will only use the information you give me for my research. I will keep data secure in compliance with the requirements of the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts and will destroy it carefully when my thesis is published. If you want to check that I am a research student or have any concerns, you can contact my research supervisor: XXXXXXXXXXXXX.

You can read the research or a summary of it when I finish my studies in 2018 if you would like to. If you want to ask me anything about the research you can email me at: XXXXXXXXXXXXX. I will answer as quickly as possible.

Thank you for your help

**Research on Apprenticeships**

You have been given an information sheet about the research I am doing with apprentices because I would like you to be part of the research. I will give you at least a week to think about the project and to discuss it with anyone you would like to talk to. If there is anything you do not understand or would like to know more about, please ask. You can e-mail me at XXXXXXXXXXXX, telephone me on XXXXXXXXXXXX or talk to me when we meet.

If you would like to be part of the research and are happy for me to interview you, please sign two copies of the consent form below. One copy is for you to keep. Information will be used for education or research purposes, including publication.

I hope you will be happy to talk to me about your experience of apprenticeships, but you can decide you no longer wish to take part at any time even after you have signed the form as long as you let me know before January 2018 when I start to write up my findings. You can contact me using the details above or I can arrange for you to speak to one of my supervisors.

Thank you

Tanya Lawes

.....

**Consent Form**

I have read the information sheet about apprenticeship research. I understand the information and have had the chance to ask any questions.

I am happy to take part in the research as described.

Name..... Date.....

Signature .....

If you would like me to send you a copy of my notes from this interview in a few weeks' time and a summary of the final report in 2019 and you are happy to share your e-mail address please include it here. Your details will not be used for any other purpose:

e-mail.....



## Appendix F: Template for Interviewing Apprentices

Initial Study – September/October 2015 version

1. Introduction, explanation of research – *explain the research and answer any questions on ethics/consent. Explain that I am not asking you to speak for all apprentices or to tell me something just because it is what you think I want to hear. I just want you to share your experiences and views – tell it like it is. Reminder about anonymity and confidentiality.*
2. How old are you?
3. What apprenticeship are you doing? What stage are you at?  
*Job/level/ 3 months into an 18-month apprenticeship etc.*
4. Can you tell me about any training that you get for your apprenticeship? On-the-job and off-the-job. *How much time each week/month etc.? How often do you see your assessor and how would you describe that relationship?*
5. What were you doing before your apprenticeship?  
*school/college/another job/unemployed*
6. What made you decide to apply for the apprenticeship?
7. How much did you know about apprenticeships before you began?  
*employment/ training/ qualifications. Did your school tell you anything?*
8. What did you think your apprenticeship would be like before you started and were you right? *Did you have any induction for either the job and or the apprenticeship? Can you tell me what it included?*
9. What do you think you will do at the end of the apprenticeship and have your expectations changed at all? *Do you think that doing the apprenticeship will help you achieve that?*
10. How easy have you found it to settle in and why do you think that is?  
*Any issues?/ employment/ training*
11. What support do you get from your training provider/assessor? *And your employer? A mentor, help with a peer group, extra tuition, time to study?*
12. Is there any other support that you think would be useful?

13. How were your optional units selected? *Did you have a say? Do you think all the training is relevant to your job? What about English, maths and ICT?*
14. What makes a quality apprenticeship? Your views
15. How well does your line manager understand the content of your apprenticeship? *Do you have regular catch ups with your line manager to discuss progress on your apprenticeship? Does your line manager meet with your assessor?*
16. Who would you go to if you have a question that you think is a bit stupid or embarrassing or a problem with work or the NVQ etc.?
17. How do you think the rest of the team see you? *Just the apprentice, the apprentice that they support or just another member of the team?*
18. Do you know who pays for your apprenticeship training? *Don't worry if you don't know. Do you feel like a customer of your apprenticeship training?*
19. Are there any apprenticeship rules that make it difficult for you? *The pay, having to do English, maths or ICT. Do you think the people who create the rules understand what apprentices want? How could they find out?*
20. Do you think your apprenticeship is worthwhile? *Do you enjoy it? Are you proud to tell people that you are an apprentice?*
21. Thank you and any further questions?
22. Feedback on this interview

## Appendix G: Template for Interviewing Employers/Line Managers

### Initial study version

1. Introduction, explanation of research, any questions on ethics/consent?
2. What is your role in the organisation and your experience of working with apprentices? How many apprentices do you manage at the moment? Have you managed apprentices previously?
3. Can you briefly summarise your organisation's apprenticeship programme? Numbers/ages/levels/diversity/types of subject sectors? Where can I find any more details/ data?
4. Thinking about your organisation as an employer, why do you think that it chooses to employ apprentices? And what would you say are the main benefits for the apprentices?
5. What usually happens to your organisation's apprentices when they complete their apprenticeship? Is that a clear expectation? Do you know what the completion rate is?
6. What would you say is the best thing about having an apprentice in your team?
7. Have you had any problems with apprentices?
8. Do you think it is harder for young apprentices to settle into the world of work? If so why do you think this is?
9. How would you describe the relationship between the apprentice and the rest of the team? Are they 'just the apprentice', 'the trainee' or 'just another colleague'?
10. What does your organisation do as an employer to help apprentices settle in, or succeed? Is there anything that you do as a line manager in addition?
11. If your apprentice has one of those embarrassing 'stupid question' questions, who do you think they go to for help?
12. How is the training organised? Both on- and off-the-job? e.g. assessor visits, English, maths & ICT, classes?
13. How well would you say you understand the training programme? Who was involved in the choice of optional units? How relevant is the content? Are there any elements that aren't particularly relevant to the job?

14. What is your relationship with the assessor(s) like? And the relationship between the assessor and the apprentice? How well informed are you about your apprentice's progress? How often do you discuss the learning and with whom?
15. From what you know about government policy or the rules around apprenticeships, is there anything that you think makes it difficult for apprentices? Pay, English and maths requirements, duration? Do you have any view about whether or not current changes will make things better or worse? Levy, funding, new standards, new end-point assessment, Institute for Apprenticeships, new Technical education routes?
16. If you had unlimited time, resource and power what would you change?
17. End of my questions. Any feedback for me on this interview? Did you feel comfortable, do you think the questions were relevant, anything you would have liked to be asked? Possibility of follow-up?
18. Reminder of next steps.

## Appendix H: Template for Interviewing Training Provider Staff

Initial study version

1. Introduction, explanation of research – I will explain the research and answer any questions on ethics/consent (10 mins)
2. Can you briefly summarise your organisation's apprenticeship programme? Numbers/ages/levels/diversity/types of employer/subject sectors? Where can I find any more details/ data?
3. What is your role in the organisation?
4. What do you think are the main reasons why apprentices do not complete their apprenticeships?
5. Do you think it is harder for young apprentices to settle into an apprentice than older ones? If so why do you think this is?
6. What do you think are the main difficulties that young apprentices have during an apprenticeship? Are these related to individual/employer/provider/system features?
7. Do any particular groups seem to cope better or worse than others with the change?
8. Does your organisation offer any support to help young apprentices get off to a good start? Explanation of support.
9. Is there anything that you don't do at the moment that you think could help?
10. Do you know of anything that employers or others do that helps?
11. Who else should I talk to?
12. Would you be able to help me identify apprentices and employers to interview?
13. Thank you and any further questions?

## Appendix I: Summary of Apprentices' Responses (initial study)

	App1	App2	App3	App4
Q2 – age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 17</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 22</li> </ul>
Q3 – apprenticeship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intermediate Childcare (Children and Young People's Workforce L2)</li> <li>• 9 months in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intermediate Childcare (Children and Young People's Workforce L2)</li> <li>• 9 months in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intermediate Childcare (Children and Young People's Workforce L2)</li> <li>• 9 months in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business Administration L3</li> <li>• 4 months in</li> </ul>
Q4 – training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessor visits about once a month</li> <li>• Most of it is filling out worksheets and sending them in</li> <li>• Visit training provider for functional skills</li> <li>• practice tests for maths functional skills (L1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessor tells us what evidence we need</li> <li>• Give us worksheets</li> <li>• (employer) signs it off</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessor comes in</li> <li>• Complete easy worksheets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I go to (the training provider) one afternoon a month and have an hour at work each week to complete a portfolio of evidence</li> <li>• You have to do some things that aren't relevant, like use a fax and be on reception. I don't do that at work so I did it at (the provider's)</li> </ul>
Q5 – before app	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School, GCSEs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• college, just registered on FT equivalent, but switched to apprenticeship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• college, GCSE resits and an A-level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unemployed</li> <li>• had a couple of short jobs, but they didn't work out</li> </ul>
Q6 – why apply	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I wanted to leave school and I didn't know what else to do.</li> <li>• The school said I either had to go to college or do an app</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I started the full time course at college, but I really wanted to spend more time with the children</li> <li>• when I saw this I thought it would be much better than college</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My mum found it.</li> <li>• I wanted to do the advanced, but (the training provider) said I didn't have the grades</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Woman at job centre suggested it</li> <li>• I thought it might be good to get a proper qualification</li> </ul>
Q7 - knowledge of apps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None really. My teacher said it was a training course</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I knew it was a job and that I would be working with the little ones</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One of my friends did an apprenticeship, but she went to college each week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not much at first.</li> <li>• I asked at the job centre before I applied</li> </ul>
Q8 – expectations of app	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I didn't really know</li> <li>• I didn't think I would have to work such long hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I knew about the qualification from college</li> <li>• I've looked after loads of little ones, I love it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I thought the course would be easy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I thought there would be more studying</li> <li>• I only started any training a couple of months ago</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I thought the training would be in college</li> <li>The assignments are hard to understand</li> <li>Didn't know I would have to do my maths again</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Really it is mostly just working</li> <li>I thought the training would be harder.</li> </ul>
Q9 – post app plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(Employer) says if we work hard she will keep us on, but I'm not sure</li> <li>I can't see myself doing this forever</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hoping to stay here until I get married</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I want to finish the intermediate and do the advanced apprenticeship</li> <li>one day I want to set up my own nursery, but that won't be for a while</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I don't know yet</li> <li>probably find a better job</li> </ul>
Q10 – settling in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is good that there are 4 of us here</li> <li>(The Training provider) gave us an induction.</li> <li>I used to muck around at school, but I've grown up a lot since then</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I love it</li> <li>I like being with (the other apprentices)</li> <li>Induction session helped</li> <li>It is much better than college because you get to know all the little ones and their parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It's OK</li> <li>You have to be in early and it is tiring</li> <li>One of the parents was quite rude to me on my first day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Really hard at first</li> <li>I am the only young person there</li> <li>The other two at work are the boss and his wife so I felt like a bit of an outside at first</li> <li>I had to keep asking about training before anything happened</li> </ul>
Q11 – support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The induction was useful</li> <li>all the worksheets</li> <li>I have gone to a couple of weekend tutorials at (the training provider) so they can help me with my maths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Induction session helped</li> <li>The worksheets are easy to follow and help you get all the information you need</li> <li>If you don't understand anything you can always ask (a senior member of staff)</li> <li>Everyone is really friendly and helps me complete my evidence sheets</li> <li>A couple of the others here finished their apprenticeships last year so they know what you have to say</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It's OK</li> <li>(The assessor) is really helpful. I can contact her if I need any help with my worksheets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is better now that I have an assessor</li> <li>(the employers) aren't really interested in my training</li> </ul>
Q12 – other support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I don't really get any time to study as it is so busy in my room</li> <li>I have to do study most weekends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a lot of writing, but (my supervisor) and (assessor) say I am doing OK</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No, I don't need any.</li> <li>The course is very easy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I should have had a training plan when I started, but I had to wait two months</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I think the others are doing better than me</li> </ul>			
Q13 – other points			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wish I had been able to start at the advanced level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wages are really low</li> <li>Work is boring</li> <li>Treated like office junior</li> </ul>



## Appendix J: Apprentices' Responses - Coded

Apprentices' Responses		Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	notes
Age	16	0												Q2 it would help to have apprentices complete a short questionnaire before the interview giving basic details (age, gender, ethnicity, apprenticeship etc)
	17	1												
	18	0												
	19	2												
	20	0												
	21	0												
	22	1												
	23	0												
	24	0												
	not known	0												
app	CYPW L2		3											As above
	Business Admin L3		1											
stage	9mths in		3											Q3 need to split question
	4mths in		1											
training	assessor visits			4										Q4 would help to quantify how much support eg 2 hrs a month
	worksheets			4										
	Functional Skills practice tests			1										
	Sessions at training provider			2										
prior	school				1									
	college (vocational)				1									
	college (academic)		?	?	1	?								
	work		?	?	0	?								
	unemployed		?		1									
why do the app	suggested by family					1								Q6 Need to separate trigger and motivation
	suggested by school					1								
	suggested by agency eg JCP					1								
	found by app					1								
	interested in work					1								
	wanted to leave school					1								
	needed work					1								
	wanted qualification					2								
prior knowledge	v little						1							
	some						2							
	a lot						1							

	work hard/long hours							2							
	training easy							2							
	training hard							1							
	didn't expect to do maths							1							
	though I would go to college							1							
	thought I would start training earlier							1							
expectations	what I expected							1							
	stay on for a while								3						
	leave								1						
	get married								1						
	further apprenticeship								1						
post-app plans	set up own business								1						
	being with other apprentices makes it easier									2					
	hard being only apprentice									1					
	induction useful									2					
	delays in training were a problem									1					
settling in	problems with customers									1					
	induction										2				
	worksheets										2				
	Sessions at training provider										1				
	assessor										3				
	other staff										1				
support	other apps										1				
	need more time to study											1			
other support	delay in getting training plan											1			
	low pay													1	
	boring work													1	
	treated like junior													1	
other points	qualification too easy													1	

repetition of induction with Q9

## **Appendix K: Revised Template for Interviewing Apprentices**

Main Study – February 2016 – January 2017 version

1. Introduction, research, ethics/consent, your views, confidentiality.
2. Details – Age, apprenticeship
3. Training – at work and college, content
4. What makes a quality apprenticeship?
5. Line manager – role & understanding
6. What were you doing before your apprenticeship and why did you apply?
7. How much did you know about apprenticeships before you began and what were your first impressions? Induction?
8. Future plans
9. Any issues? Support, confidante
10. How do colleagues see you?
11. What does your training provider/assessor do to help you? Employer? Mentor? Is there any other support that you think would be useful?
12. Do you feel like a customer of your apprenticeship training?
13. Are there any apprenticeship rules that make it difficult for you?
14. What makes an apprenticeship successful?
15. Thank you and any further questions?
16. Feedback

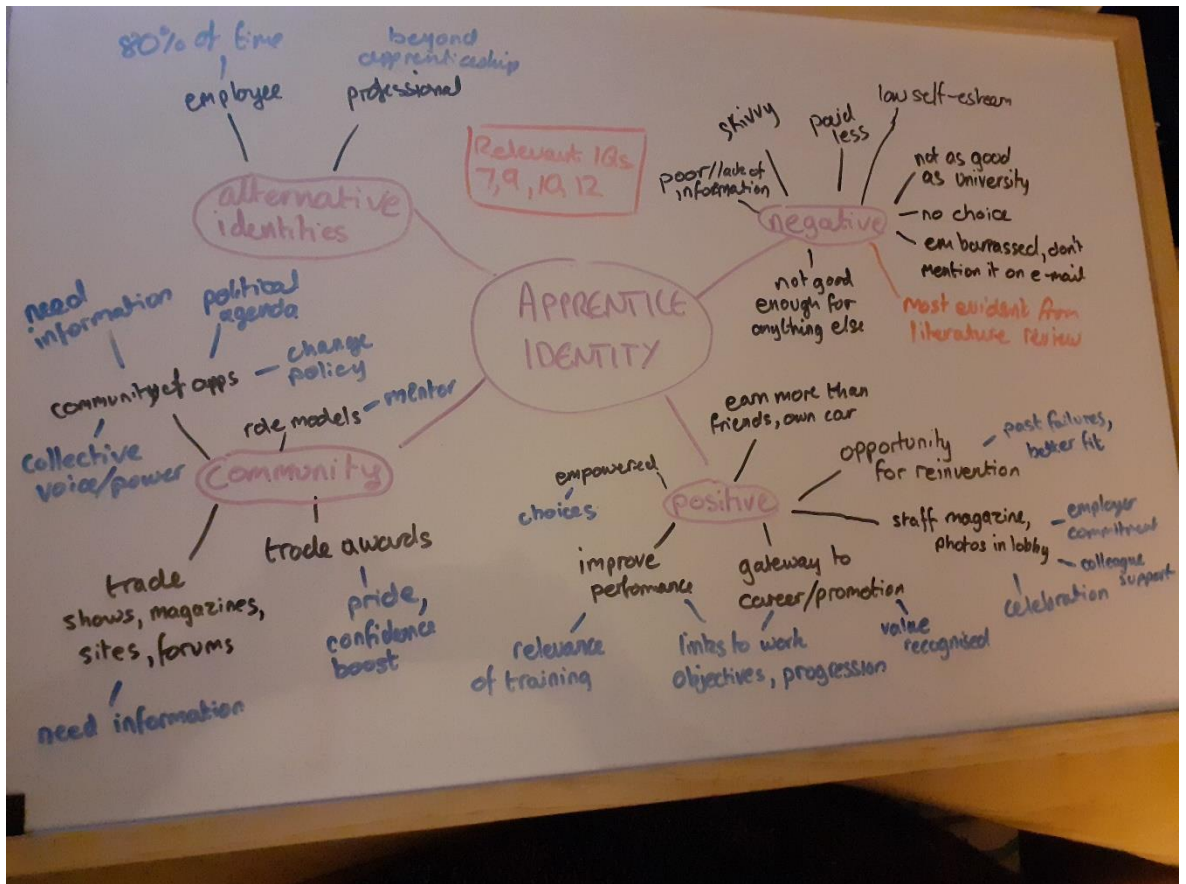
Appendix L: Question Sheet with field notes 'Angel'

10 Feb 2016 [redacted] ANGEL

1. Introduction, research, ethics/consent, your views, confidentiality.
2. Details – Age, apprenticeship L2 Retail 20yrs
3. Training – at work and college, content Workplace Final Unit
4. What makes a quality apprenticeship?
5. Line manager – role & understanding uncle Partnership
6. What were you doing before your apprenticeship and why did you apply? college bullied drop out Studied failure
7. How much did you know about apprenticeships before you began and what were your first impressions? Induction? Pioneer exciting unknown discovery
8. Future plans Goals
9. Any issues? Support, confidante [redacted]
10. How do colleagues see you? —
11. What does your training provider/assessor do to help you? Employer? Mentor? Is there any other support that you think would be useful? assessor OK helpful
12. Do you feel like a customer of your apprenticeship training? ?
13. Are there any apprenticeship rules that make it difficult for you? —
14. What makes an apprenticeship successful?
15. Thank you and any further questions? Change Wait to be part of that
16. Feedback

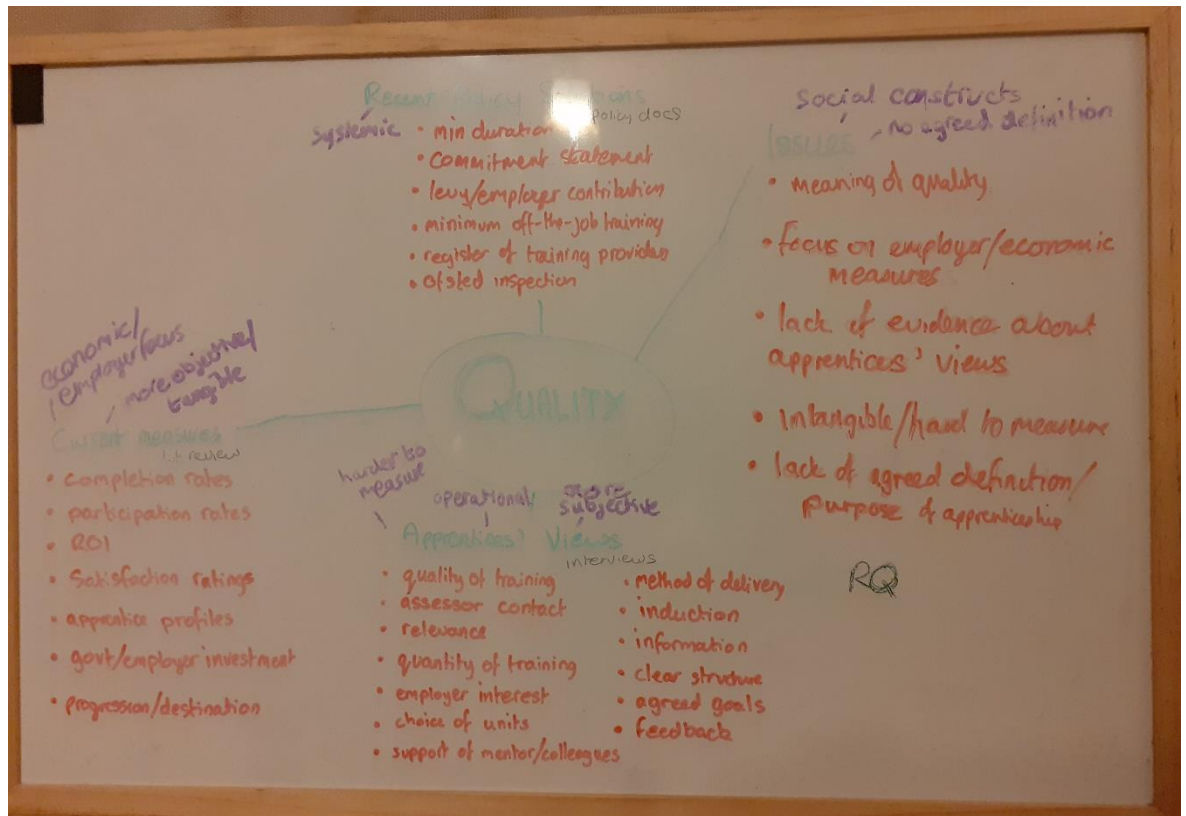
[redacted] @ gmail [redacted]

Appendix M: Mind Map Linking Findings and Theory on Apprentice Identity



## Appendix N: Analysis of Findings: Quality

Based on literature review and fieldwork





## Appendix P: Analysing responses

Example: factors associated with apprenticeship quality

Using categories of individual, employer, provider and system features (Hogarth et al, 2009, p. 49)

