



The road less travelled

Experiences of employers that support the progression of Advanced Apprentices to higher education

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1 | Summary

Apprenticeships are central to the Government's skills strategy for England, and the ability of work-based learners to progress through and beyond Apprenticeships to higher education is a crucial part of policy. However, despite these aspirations, very few Advanced Apprentices currently progress to higher education – for Advanced Apprentices, higher education is too often *the road less travelled*.

The Skills for Sustainable Communities Lifelong Learning Network commissioned CFE in summer 2010 to conduct research with employers into their experiences of Advanced Apprentices' progression to higher education. We set out to explore the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of employers that have supported former Advanced Apprentices into and through higher education. By showcasing the examples in this research, we hope to raise both awareness and expectations of the potential, and the business benefits, of Advanced Apprentices' progression to higher education.

The research focused on four key questions, the main answers to which are outlined below.

How do Advanced Apprentices progress to higher education?

- > Higher education in this context means far more than a traditional, full-time undergraduate course. The employers support progression to higher level certificates, diplomas, Foundation degrees and Higher Apprenticeships, sometimes later supporting employees through Honours degrees, Master's and even doctorates. This demonstrates the variety of experiences, as well as the potential of Advanced Apprentices to progress.
- > The employers use a range of different types of provider for higher level skills, including universities, FE colleges and private training providers. There is a clear preference for using higher level skills providers that are located nearby to employers' premises, unless high-quality distance learning packages are available. Several employers also delivered all or aspects of the higher level development themselves, sometimes holding contracts with the relevant public funding councils.
- > The length of study for both Advanced Apprenticeships and higher education varies considerably, depending on the type of course, the modes of study, and the individual ability of those concerned. Three core study modes emerged from our employer consultations: day release, block release, and distance learning.
- > The scale of Advanced Apprenticeship progression varies dramatically in our sample group. Some employers aim to progress a majority of their Advanced Apprentices to higher levels. Others will select only the most suitable candidates. Finally, some employers only support Advanced Apprentices to progress in exceptional circumstances and do not routinely rely on such progression to fill any higher level skills needs.

What drives employers to support their Advanced Apprentices to progress?

- > The key driver for employers to support Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher education is a clear business need for higher level skills. This may be owing to the technical nature of the business, a competitive marketplace, or in order to meet replacement demand. Maintaining a positive reputation for supporting staff development can also be a business driver, which may be supported by an organisational culture that views progression as important.
- > In some organisations, employees themselves have a degree of control over their own progression, and can choose to pursue higher level development, providing this meets the requirements of the business. Providers of higher level skills may be a driver to encourage employers to support progression, through offering subsidised courses.

What are the costs and benefits of progression?

- > The most obvious component of cost for higher level development is fees charged by higher level skills providers. These may include standard fees for learners, as well as “co-funding” contributions on top of fees.
- > At least as important as these direct fees, and more important for many, is the “opportunity cost” of training – that is the costs arising as a result of an individual being absent from normal work in order to pursue higher level development. This includes their salary for time out of the office, the loss of productive work and the necessary reorganisation of work patterns around study.
- > In most circumstances, employers will invest in higher education only if they can see a benefit to the business. Just as the principal driver for investment is a business need for higher level skills, so the principal benefit of progression is obtaining those skills.
- > Many employers favour “growing their own” higher level skills through supporting Advanced Apprentices to progress. This can be because the required higher level skills, or specific business knowledge, may be difficult to recruit externally.
- > Increased staff motivation and retention is another important benefit of supporting Advanced Apprentices to progress on to higher levels.
- > Weighing up the costs and benefits is not always done in a precise way, but, on balance, these employers all felt that the benefits outweighed the costs, and see them as investments for the future.

What are the barriers and enablers to supporting progression?

- > The most important barrier to progression for Advanced Apprentices is insufficient demand for higher level skills from their employer. This may be difficult to overcome, but it is important that employers consider how higher education might make their business more competitive.
- > Higher education may require time away from the workplace, which can act as a barrier to progression. Working closely with providers to develop flexible delivery methods can help to overcome this, as can asking employees to study in their own time.
- > Having access to the right courses, in the right location, with the right delivery method is important for encouraging more employers to support staff development. Achieving this is greatly helped by employers building professional relationships with skills providers. Regular and honest communication on progress and mutual priorities is a must.
- > In some cases Advanced Apprentices may not be suited to development at higher levels immediately after completing their Apprenticeship. Employers feel that some individuals must gain additional work experience before considering further progression.
- > Former Advanced Apprentices may need to delay job roles progression or bonus and overtime payments in order to undertake higher level development, meaning that choosing to progress may, at least in the short-term, have negative financial implications.
- > The majority of the employers we consulted intend to continue supporting their Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher levels. This is fundamentally needed because of their continuing demand for higher level skills.

2 | Introduction

The rise of Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships – employer-focused training that leads to nationally recognised qualifications – are central to the Government’s economic and skills strategies for England. While many other education and skills programmes are facing deep cuts in public expenditure, funding for Apprenticeships is actually increasing.¹ The ability of work-based learners to progress through and beyond Apprenticeships to higher education is seen as vital by Government. In September 2010, the Skills Minister, John Hayes MP, emphasised that:

We want to create a clearer ladder of progression in the Apprenticeships Programme. There should be greater emphasis on progression to Level 3 and beyond.

And this is why we are committed to expanding, in particular, the number of Apprenticeships available at more advanced skills levels. The Apprenticeship programme, newly refocused to prioritise progression to Level 3 and higher will help deliver the technician-level skills on which the jobs and industries of the coming decades will depend.²

John Hayes MP, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills & Lifelong Learning

The Coalition Government’s skills strategy, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, published in November 2010, outlines plans to expand the number of adult Apprenticeships (aged 19 and over) by up to 75,000 by 2014/15.³ The skills strategy emphasises that learners should aspire to reach at least Level 3 (the level of Advanced Apprenticeships), if not higher, in order, “*to widen access, there will be clear progression routes from Level 3 Apprenticeships to higher level skills, including Level 4 Apprenticeships or higher education.*”⁴

The road less travelled

Despite these aspirations, very few Advanced Apprentices currently progress to higher education – for Advanced Apprentices, higher education is too often *the road less travelled*. Research by the Universities Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) suggests only four per cent of Advanced Apprentices reach higher education within one year of completing their Apprenticeship.⁵ Similarly, figures from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) show that only six per cent of those completing Advanced Apprenticeships in 2002/03 had reached higher education four years later.⁶ These low progression rates compare unfavourably to comparable qualifications at Level 3: around 90 per cent of A-level learners

¹ See Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS), *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, (November 2010), p. 19, and BIS, *Further Education – New Horizon: Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth*, (November 2010), p. 4. Spend on adult Apprenticeships will increase by up to £250m by the end of the Spending Review period, relative to the previous Government.

² John Hayes MP, *Key role for Apprenticeships*, Speech at the Institute of Directors, London (29 September 2010).

³ BIS, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, p.19. There were 159,800 adult Apprenticeship starts in 2009/10, of which 58,700 were Advanced Apprenticeships. The Data Service, *Statistical First Release: Post-16 Education and Skills: Learner Participation, Outcomes, and Level of Highest Qualification Held*, (November 2010), Table S8.2

⁴ BIS, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, p. 7.

⁵ UVAC, *Progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education in England*, (November 2009), p. 17.

⁶ HEFCE, *Pathways to Higher Education: Apprenticeships*, (May 2009), p. 8.

progress to higher education.⁷ According to HEFCE, the scale of Advanced Apprentices' progression varies by sector, showing accountancy to have the highest proportion and volume of progression, followed by engineering in volume terms.⁸

Apprenticeships (and any subsequent work-based progression to higher education) involve three major partners – the learner, the provider, and the employer. The employer's role is key as they often need to cover the cost of fees, as well as allowing their employees time out of work to study. The skills strategy emphasises the importance of employers to Apprenticeships: “*Apprenticeships are jobs; therefore employers are central to the continuing success of the programme.*”⁹ And employers are equally important to any subsequent progression to higher education.

So why are progression rates for Advanced Apprentices so low? Previous research suggests employers face various barriers to supporting employees' progression to higher education and some have pointed to the need for a culture change on the part of employers to support and develop the skills of employees completing Level 3 vocational qualifications.¹⁰ Many employers do not have a sufficient demand for higher level skills to drive expenditure on this kind of staff development; it has been observed that some employers' ambitions for progression appear to stall after Level 3.¹¹ The plethora of higher level qualifications and providers available can become confusing and it may be difficult to relate qualifications to a business and its existing job roles.¹²

Even where employers do decide that supporting progression is worthwhile, they may find difficulties in engaging with providers of higher education. Higher education admissions and academic staff often have limited understanding of Apprenticeships: the frameworks have not historically attracted UCAS tariff points and there is a general lack of information about vocational qualifications, and Apprenticeships in particular, on university course entry profiles.¹³ When apprentices are theoretically accepted on to higher education programmes, the flexibility of delivery programmes may not be sufficient to enable employees to take on study alongside work.¹⁴ Inadequate information, advice and guidance to apprentices themselves may also be an issue, with Aimhigher Greater Manchester finding that 80% of Apprentices knew nothing or little of the range of HE courses available and the benefits these could bring.¹⁵

This report

In the current climate of austerity, the Government has signalled that individuals and employers should contribute a greater share of the costs of higher education, to better reflect the benefits they receive. It is therefore more important than ever that employers understand

⁷ UVAC, *Progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education in England*, p. 17.

⁸ HEFCE, *Pathways to Higher Education: Apprenticeships*, p. 17.

⁹ BIS, *Skills for Sustainable Growth*, p. 19.

¹⁰ UVAC, *Progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education in England*, p. 32.

¹¹ UVAC, *Progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education in England*, p. 20.

¹² UVAC, *Progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education in England*, p. 32, and Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network, *Apprentices and Progression to Higher Education: Investigating Barriers, Building Aspirations*, (August 2010). See here: www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/news/latest-news/51/apprentices-and-progression-to-higher-education-investigating-barriers-building-aspirations.html

¹³ Linking London Lifelong Learning Network, *Quality of admissions information for applicants to full-time undergraduate study*, (February 2010) and V Seddon, *An Analysis of the Progression of Advanced Apprentices to Higher Education in England*, (UVAC, 2005), p. 24.

¹⁴ UVAC, *Progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education in England*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Aimhigher Greater Manchester, *The Step-In to HE Project: A report on project activity between September 2007 and July 2008*, (2008), pp. 2 & 10.

the process involved in, and potential benefits from, progressing their Advanced Apprentices to higher education.

In this context, we set out to explore the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of employers that have supported former Advanced Apprentices into and through higher education. This report is structured around the four key questions that we addressed through the research:

- > How do Advanced Apprentices progress to higher education?
- > What drives employers to support the progression of their Advanced Apprentices?
- > What are the costs and benefits of progression?
- > What are the barriers and enablers to supporting progression?

After a brief statement on method, this report moves on to answer each of these questions in turn, before drawing conclusions and highlighting key messages. Brief case studies of employers that participated in the research are interspersed throughout the report.

3 | Method

The Skills for Sustainable Communities Lifelong Learning Network commissioned CFE in summer 2010 to conduct research with employers into their experiences of Advanced Apprentices' progression to higher education.

Method

During September and October 2010, we conducted 20 in-depth qualitative interviews by telephone with representatives of 18 different employers that had supported Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher levels. In each case we interviewed the member of staff responsible for staff training or human resources. The interviews were semi-structured, supported by a standard topic guide, and each lasted around one hour.

This research focuses *only* on those employers that had already successfully supported an Advanced Apprentice to progress to higher levels. Given that only 8% of employers offer Apprenticeships of any kind,¹⁶ and even fewer have supported Advanced Apprentices to progress on to higher levels, a major challenge was identifying sufficient numbers of employers that met our criteria. It was therefore also challenging to obtain a broad cross section of employers, by size, sector and nature of progression activity. We used networks of contacts through training providers, Lifelong Learning Networks, the National Apprenticeships Service and others to identify the employers that took part in this research.

The employers came from a variety of sectors and ranged in size from small to large organisations. More than half of the employers that participated in the research operate primarily in the engineering sector and related activities, such as manufacturing, which despite exhibiting a relatively low proportion of apprenticeship progression (5%)¹⁷, has the highest overall number of Advanced Apprentices across all sectors.¹⁸

Definitions used

- > **Advanced Apprenticeships:** this research is concerned with Advanced Apprenticeships at Level 3 across all frameworks and sectors.
- > **Higher level qualifications:** we define here as being qualifications at Level 4 or higher on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, which includes Higher National Certificates (HNCs), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), Foundation degrees and, subsequently, Honours degrees and Master's degrees.¹⁹
- > **Progression:** the notion of progression, in this context, is defined by qualifications. That is, progression from an Advanced Apprenticeship to a higher level qualification, as opposed to progression in job roles.

¹⁶ UKCES, National Employer Skills Survey for England 2009: Key Findings Report, (March 2010), p. 7.

¹⁷ Higher Education Funding Council for England, Pathways to Higher Education: Apprenticeships, (May 2009), p. 17.

¹⁸ The Data Service, *Statistical First Release: Post-16 Education and Skills: Learner Participation, Outcomes, and Level of Highest Qualification Held*, (November 2010), Table S8.2

¹⁹ For more information, see: QAA, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, (August 2008), www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/FHEQ08.pdf

Participating employers

	Sector / Industry	UK employees
Small and medium-sized enterprises	Hairdressing	40
	Childcare	160
	Manufacturing	249
Large enterprises	Manufacturing	255
	Software engineering	350
	Manufacturing	360
	Engineering	650
	Engineering	900
	Engineering	1,500
	Engineering	2,000
	Automotive	4,000
Very large enterprises	Engineering	5,200
	Automotive	6,000
	Engineering	10,500
	Power	11,000
	Engineering	13,000
	Engineering	21,000
	Local Authority	40,000

Table 1: Summary of employers contacted

4 | How do Advanced Apprentices progress to higher education?

This chapter considers the nature of progression for Advanced Apprentices in our sample of employers. We consider the following questions:

- > What qualifications do Advanced Apprentices progress to?
- > Where do they study?
- > How is higher education delivered?
- > How many Advanced Apprentices progress?
- > How does progression relate to job roles?

What qualifications do Advanced Apprentices progress to?

Firstly, for context, we asked the employers about the Advanced Apprenticeships at Level 3 from which their employees progress. The subjects of these Apprenticeships include engineering and related areas, such as software engineering (in the case of a transport, aerospace and defence software systems company) and civil engineering (in the case of a company in the rail and metro business), as well as hairdressing, business administration, finance, and children's care, learning and development.

In some cases, employers support progression from several different Advanced Apprenticeship frameworks. For example, one large engineering company, supports Craft and Technical Apprenticeships on one side of the business (which include manufacturing and engineering), and Commercial Apprenticeships on another (including IT, Finance and Sales and Marketing). In one large car manufacturer, progression is offered only for certain frameworks, but not others, depending on the job roles the Advanced Apprentices are to enter.

It's really linked to what is the ultimate job that we want them to do, and what level is that ultimate job? For a multi-skilled technician, the level that we need to get someone to is the Foundation degree level. [On] the manufacturing side, it's a lower level.

Large car manufacturer

The employers support Advanced Apprentices to progress to a range of higher level qualifications. It is interesting to see how varied higher education can be, particularly in a work-based setting – it is certainly not confined to traditional, full-time, three-year Honours degrees. Higher level courses commonly include Foundation degrees, Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), usually in subject areas directly related to those of the Advanced Apprenticeship frameworks previously undertaken. In three cases, employers supported staff to move on to Higher Apprenticeships, an apprenticeship framework at Level 4. The higher level course may focus on providing more specialised, in-depth skills, one example being progression from an Advanced Apprenticeship in Engineering to a Foundation degree in Materials Processing including metallurgy. There were also examples of employers seeking to *broaden* the skills and knowledge of their former Advanced Apprentices by encouraging them to take more generic management qualifications.

Progression for Advanced Apprentices can happen in several stages. In most cases, the initial progression takes the former Advanced Apprentice as far as Level 5 – a Foundation degree or HNC/HND. From there, several employers offer further progression to Honours degrees and Master's degrees and, in one case, a company has sponsored a former Apprentice to do a

doctorate. In another case, one employer identifies a handful of its Advanced Apprentices in engineering each year as having the potential to become future leaders of the business, and sponsors them on a Master's programme at an elite Russell Group university (see case study on page 32).

Where do they study?

As we might expect, the employers we interviewed work with a range of different types of provider for higher level skills, with most using universities or further education colleges, or in the case of many Foundation degrees, a partnership between both types of institution. Several employers also deliver all or aspects of the higher level development themselves, sometimes with contracts with the relevant public funding councils, and sometimes delivered in their own internal training centres. In a minority of cases, private providers are used, often in partnership with a college or university. In some instances, the higher level skills provider is the same provider that supplies the Advanced Apprenticeship training, but in most examples different providers are used.

One clear pattern that emerges is the tendency of employers to use education and skills providers that are local to the site where the employees are based. When an organisation employs Apprentices across multiple sites, numerous providers may be used in order to reduce travel overheads. Therefore localism and convenience drive the choice of providers far more than other criteria, such as reputation, as illustrated by these two large engineering employers:

Basically, we use [a Further Education] College for the HNC, because that is literally five minutes' walk from the site.

Large engineering employer

[The choice of provider] very much depends on the geographical locations of where the individuals are. Because we're so dispersed, we don't tend to bring everyone into one facility.

Large engineering employer

Where providers can show flexibility and offer distance learning, there is less of a need for higher level skills providers to be local, a point made two employers that use the Open University to deliver Foundation degrees.

How is higher education delivered?

Previous research has identified different models of delivery for Apprenticeship progression to higher education, including progression *after* completing an Advanced Apprenticeship, or an *overlap* between the Advanced Apprenticeship and the higher level qualification.²⁰ We find examples of both models among our employers and the length of study for both the Advanced Apprenticeships and the higher education varies considerably, depending on the type of course, the modes of study, and the individual ability of those concerned. For example, in the case study below, Advanced Apprentices can fast-track from an Advanced Apprenticeship to the achievement of a Foundation degree within three years, by studying for elements of both qualifications concurrently. They can even then "top up" to an Honours degree in four years, by spending their fourth year studying full-time at university on sabbatical. By contrast, we find in other employers it can take four to eight years to achieve an Advanced Apprenticeship and a Foundation degree (studying part-time), and, in one case, up to eight years to go through an Advanced Apprenticeship, HNC, HND and achieve a BEng (studying part-time).

²⁰ UVAC, *Features of apprenticeship programmes that support progression to higher education*, (Foundation Degree Forward, July 2008), p. 8.

An integrated, fast-track approach to Apprenticeship progression

This large software engineering company tends to employ four Advanced Apprentices in Software Engineering per year. The progression of these individuals to higher education happens in an ‘integrated programme’ – their Trainee Software Development Programme – in which Advanced Apprentices are fast-tracked to completion of a Foundation degree within three years, with the option of a fourth year sabbatical to top-up to an Honours degree in Software Engineering. The full programme looks as follows:

	Advanced Apprenticeship	Foundation degree	Honours degree	Notes
Year 1				Full-time at college.
Year 2				In the business, day release.
Year 3				In the business, day release.
Year 4				Full time at university.

Figure 1: Case study – an integrated, fast track approach to Apprenticeship progression

Given this variety of progression models, it is no surprise that the intensity of study on these courses can differ greatly from employer to employer. Different business circumstances and requirements entail different and flexible approaches to study patterns. Three core study modes emerged from our employer consultations: day release, block release, and distance learning, as outlined below.

- > **Day release:** This is the most common form of studying for a higher level qualification for the former Advanced Apprentices in our sample. In these cases, the employee studies for one day a week in college, or at university, and spend the rest of the time in the workplace.
- > **Block release:** Within our sample there is a variety of models of block release. One employer, mentioned above, allows its former Advanced Apprentices / Foundation degree students to top-up to an Honours degree by going to university full-time in the fourth year of a programme, having spent the intervening two years in the business. In other examples, they would be on block release for six months, before spending six months in the business; while in others it was a period of weeks, for example an 11-week block release to study for an HNC at college. This is particularly useful where shift patterns or geography mean that day release over a long period would be impractical.
- > **Distance learning:** In some of our employers, including the two that used the Open University, former Advanced Apprentices study online through distance learning. Employees may study within the workplace – for instance in a dedicated learning space on-site that staff can use – or outside of it. In the instance of a Foundation degree in Early Childhood Studies, the employer also allows staff to study in groups during working hours (see case study on page 27).

The employers emphasise that employees are often required to study in their own time outside of work, particularly when studying for Foundation or Honours degrees.

Sometimes they take [day release] as a day unpaid and we change their contract so that they're actually contracted to do fewer hours.... Or sometimes there's those of them who've actually got a lot of financial commitments, so will say, 'No, I'll stick on the original hours.' So, they then work in the evenings to make up that time.

Large manufacturing employer

How many Advanced Apprentices progress?

The scale of Advanced Apprenticeship progression varies greatly in our sample group, both as proportions of apprentices and in absolute numbers. Ultimately, the proportion of Advanced Apprentices that progress to higher level training and development depends on the individual business needs – which may vary over time – and also on the individual ability of the Advanced Apprentices concerned. At least three models are evident among our employers: firstly, where all or most (i.e. over three-quarters), are intended to progress to higher qualifications; secondly where progression is considered on a case-by-case basis; and lastly those cases where progression is occasional or even accidental.

The clearest example of the model in which **all are intended to progress** is that where the Advanced Apprenticeship is combined with a higher level qualification on a single *traineeship* programme. In these instances, there is little or no differentiation between the Advanced Apprenticeship and a subsequent higher level qualification. In these cases the vast majority (sometimes all) are intended to progress on to the higher level qualification. For example, one software engineering employer combines an Advanced Apprenticeship and Foundation degree in a three-year programme, with a further option for a one-year top-up to Honours degree; another firm in the power industry has Advanced Apprentices studying concurrently with an HNC, with the two programmes overlapping. This has been referred to as the ‘integrated model’ of Apprenticeship progression to HE,²¹ and shows a strategic commitment from the employers to grow the higher level skills the employer consistently needs.

Our progression is maybe a little bit different because, fundamentally, we expect everyone, when they start, to go up to at least Foundation degree level. So the progression is already built into the scheme.

Large car manufacturer

In most cases, unless it's extremely apparent that the individual either can't cope, or we're not getting good feedback from the provider, we will put them all on to Higher National [Certificates].

Large manufacturing employer

Clearly, in cases such as these, individuals are recruited on to an Advanced Apprenticeship scheme in the knowledge that they will progress on to higher education. Hence, the criteria that the employer applies in the original selection process will take account of this.

Other employers consider Advanced Apprentices for progression on a **case-by-case** basis only, resulting in much smaller proportions progressing. This model entails a complex decision-making process, often including detailed appraisal and development monitoring of individuals, an assessment of the business needs in the area that the Advanced Apprentice works, as well as liaison with providers. If no apprentices are judged to be suitable for progression, these employers may well recruit as an alternative, or else manage without these additional higher level skills altogether.

We look at the progress and the outcomes of their Level 3 Apprenticeship with regards to the assessor notes and how they've coped with it and then we have a development discussion, and then we decide whether they are going to go further... We identify some of the high fliers from that programme and we plug them into the Higher National Apprenticeship scheme. So they go from...doing their BTECs and their HNCs, HNDs and go on to Foundation degrees from there.

²¹ UVAC, *Progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education in England*, p. 41.

Considering progression on a case-by-case basis

This large car manufacturer recruits, on average, around 15 Advanced Apprentices each year at their main site. They join the company on a range of frameworks, broadly delineated as Craft Apprenticeships (working within manufacturing), Technical Apprenticeships (working within engineering), Commercial Apprenticeships (working within finance, logistics and information systems), and Business Apprenticeships (working within personnel and marketing).

The progression of these individuals to higher education is considered on a case-by-case basis:

Theoretically, any of [the Advanced Apprentices] can progress. It depends on their desire to progress, and also what the business requires them to do.

A number of factors affect these decisions, including the area of the business that the individual works in – for example, Technical and Commercial Apprentices are more likely to progress to higher education than Craft Apprentices are – and the business requirements at the time, as well as the individual ability and desire of the Advanced Apprentice.

The decision-making process is driven by the individual training plan of each Advanced Apprentice. This incorporates six-monthly performance reviews with their manager, before a trilateral meeting between the Advanced Apprentice, their manager and the Human Resources team:

When they're getting towards the end [of their Advanced Apprenticeship] they will sit down and talk with their manager about whether they want to progress on to anything further, and whether there's a need for them to do it in the business...Following that, somebody from [the human resources] team will sit with the manager and the individual and talk about how they're progressing. That's the forum where the conversation will come up about them going off to [higher] education.

While the business need will ultimately determine whether the company invests in an individual's progression to higher education, the employer points out that the individuals most often drive their own progression by showing capability and willingness:

We're very supportive as a business for them to do it, but I think it's a little bit more the individual who will say, 'I've finished my Apprenticeship now. What can I do next?' So I'd say the drive probably comes more from the individual.

In the last five years, 23 of their Advanced Apprentices have progressed on to higher education qualifications, such as Foundation degrees, HNCs and Honours degrees, across various subjects – including electronics degrees and business degrees – depending on their area of work.

Figure 2: Case study – progression on a case-by-case basis

Sometimes all, or most, Advanced Apprentices are intended to make the first step of progression to Level 5 – an HNC/HND or Foundation degree – but then any subsequent progression, perhaps to an Honours or Master's degree, is optional or considered on a case-by-case basis.

If we look at it broad brush, if 100% finish with the HNC, probably 70% will go on to do a HND and from those, probably, it drops down to another 20% or 30% who want to go on to a degree.

Large engineering employer

Finally, some employers have supported progression of Advanced Apprentices almost accidentally, or only **in exceptional circumstances**. In these businesses the organisation does not routinely rely on progression from Advanced Apprenticeships to support any higher level skills needs. Although such progression has happened in the past, this was only because of particular circumstances that are not routine for the business. Examples of this included those where the employer undertook higher education because it had been subsidised by providers, with no charge to the employer. In cases such as these the proportion of Advanced Apprentices progressing are likely to be very low.

It is important to point out that rates of progression within employers vary over time and some employers move between typologies as their circumstances and needs change.

How does progression relate to job roles?

We found that where former Advanced Apprentices are progressing to higher levels, there is often no clearly defined link to progression to a new job role. Ultimately, progression through *job roles* depends on what opportunities arise in the business, as well as a host of other factors, such as individual aptitude and work experience. A causal link between achieving a higher qualification and job role progression is not always clear, as the most able go on to do higher education, and they are the ones that are likely to have been promoted fastest anyway.

What we do is we say, 'Look, your starting post will be at a shop floor or, if you're lucky, technician level, depending on what positions we have available at the time and depending on how managers across the business have seen you and who wants to take you in. What happens after that is your career.'

Large engineering employer

The key point for many employers is that higher level development *enables* employees to progress and enhances their *potential* to progress in the future. Some job roles do require higher level qualifications and, while a former Advanced Apprentice's achievement of qualifications is not directly linked to such promotions, it does enable them when vacancies arise.

In those examples already mentioned where the Advanced Apprenticeship is combined with a higher level qualification in one traineeship programme, there tend to be clearer links between qualifications and progression through job roles. Employees tend to be considered 'trainees' until they have completed their higher education, at which point they progress into their entry level role with the company. In these cases, the entry level role usually requires a higher level qualification. This progression through a traineeship may also be associated with incremental salary rises, as in one large automotive manufacturer:

It's not promotion as such; what basically happens is, there is the start point as a trainee, and there is the bottom of the band as a full technician. Fundamentally what we do is we step up their salary every six months, as long as they attain the performance levels, and they pass their tests at college and university. So fundamentally, they are a trainee technician, but every six months they would get a rise, as long as they meet every criteria.

Large car manufacturer

In another example, former Advanced Apprentices who work up to an Honours degree can enter roles at the same level as the company's graduate recruits.

They will go into a software engineering role...that's what they would be able to do once they've completed their course...so they are basically fully qualified engineers. So they can walk into a fully qualified post, as any graduate would.

Large software engineering employer

This shows the potential of Advanced Apprenticeships as the start of an alternative route to graduate-level jobs and careers.

5 | What drives employers to support their Advanced Apprentices to progress?

This chapter explores the factors that drive businesses to support their employees to progress on to higher level development. For Advanced Apprentice progression to higher levels to be most successful and sustainable, employers themselves must be a driving force behind the progression. The employer is the actor with the most control over whether progression occurs; therefore it is vital that they can see a business need for making such an investment. In many cases there are several business drivers interacting within a single organisation.

The main drivers revealed by the employers are:

- > A business need for higher level skills. This may be owing to the technical nature of the business, a competitive marketplace, or in order to meet replacement demand.
- > Maintaining a positive reputation for supporting staff development, which may be supported by an organisational culture that views progression as important.
- > Employees themselves, providing this meets the requirements of the business.
- > Providers of higher level skills, especially through offering subsidised courses.
- > Regulatory or professional requirements.

A business need for higher level skills

Undoubtedly, the primary driver for the employers we consulted was a defined need for higher level skills. Employers in many sectors require advanced general or technical skills to function, or maintain competitiveness, and where these cannot be recruited, they must be developed internally. Often internal progression will happen alongside graduate recruitment, in order to provide two routes to accessing higher level skills.

Businesses use higher level skills to ensure they remain competitive, especially in internationally growing markets. To keep the competitive edge and address skills needs, the process of progressing employees has become embedded in the employers' human resources systems and structures.

I believe we need to have a level of education commensurate with the technical character of our machines. It's something we provide for individuals to reach their maximum potential.

Large manufacturing employer

I suppose it's the business, the market we operate in. We are an extremely high level technological organisation and there's an expectation that people working in an engineering capacity in any of our facilities are well-educated, competent, motivated people.

Large engineering employer

Some specific higher level skills are difficult to recruit by their nature, or because of a lack of supply of skilled people in the labour market. When an employer requires a very specific skill set, recruiting "off the street" can be difficult, leading many businesses to opt to "grow their own" talent. By developing employees from within, it allows the business to develop the specific skill set it requires, rather than recruiting from a small or unspecialised labour pool.

We want a very specific, multi-skilled technician who can do both electrical and mechanical. The best way of getting the right calibre of people is to grow our own.

Large car manufacturer

As well as keeping abreast of sector changes, employers use higher level skills as a tool for succession planning. Several employers took a long-term view, intending to develop former apprentices to be future leaders and managers of the organisation.

Right through the organisation we kind of have the ‘grow your own’ mentality. Not many of our senior people are recruited from outside, they will have tended to come through the internal development systems. That goes right back to our apprentices. We say our apprentices are not only our future, if you like, in that particular job, but we would like to see them coming through to be our future managers and directors.

Large car manufacturer

Currently, engineering and manufacturing in particular are facing uncertainty over future skills supplies, with an aging workforce and insufficient new entrants. Encouraging higher education allows these businesses to address future skills and business needs, creating a “*stock of talent for the future*”, as illustrated in the case study below.

Replacement demand as a driver for progression

This company designs, supplies and constructs advanced steam generation technology for the power industry. With global headquarters in the UK, the company employs around 5000 people in the UK at sites across the country. Each year approximately 60 to 70 people join their Advanced Apprenticeship scheme in welding, erecting, mechanical fitting, pipefitting or project control. The company has supported a proportion of its apprentices to progress to higher level NVQs, HE certificates and beyond.

Up until relatively recently, progression for Advanced Apprentices here has been relatively *ad hoc*, happening where local demand from company sites requires it. However, over the last year, the company has taken a more strategic approach, piloting a Foundation degree with a further education college, with an aim to professionalising a certain set of skills within the business, with externally recognised competence pathways. The principal driver for taking this more strategic approach is an anticipation of future skills shortages owing to the age of the current workforce.

There are very few people entering the industry with enough experience to take on the role, but a number of people who will be exiting the business over a period of years into retirement. Our business growth ambitions may actually be compromised by that lack of experience and knowledge transfer. ... You look at the external market and the average age of rigger erector is 56. You think about 50 per cent of that population will retire within nine to ten years. That’s a big time bomb for the overall sector.

This age and demographic issue is present across the engineering workforce. The UK needs 30,000 skilled scientists and engineers every year between now and 2016 to fill the gap of highly skilled workers reaching retirement²² and 587,000 new workers in manufacturing between 2007 and 2017²³. Given this anticipated demand for higher level

²² SEMTA, *Skills and the future of UK Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies: The Full Sector Skills Assessment for SEMTA’s sectors*, (January 2010), p. 22.

²³ Engineering UK, *Engineering UK 2009/10 – report*, (August 2010), p. 16.

skills, the business has opted to develop staff internally to put themselves in a strong position ahead of time, to avoid the need to recruit and train staff from scratch when the current cohort of skilled staff does retire.

You'll be able to recruit and you'll be able to train new, but by the time the demand comes in, in about three years time, everybody will be brand shiny new with no experience. We're trying to get ahead of the game and professionalise some of those skills, build the experience, so that three years from now we've got a bigger pool of experienced, talented, credible people ready to service our needs.

Figure 3: Case study – replacement demand as a driver of progression

In certain industries, such as childcare, the turnover of staff is relatively high, meaning that supporting Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher levels is the only way to maintain the required skills profile of the company.

Because the life cycle of a nursery nurse is five years, we tend to find that we train somebody to a certain level, and then they go off and have children and perhaps don't come back in that position. So we then have to start all over again. That is quite frustrating in that way.

Medium-sized childcare employer

Building a positive reputation

Another interesting driver of progression mentioned by some larger employers is to maintain a positive reputation as an organisation that invests in its staff as a matter of course. A history or culture of progression can be as powerful a driver as strict business need, although undoubtedly the two are complementary. Several employers have significant proportions of ex-apprentices in their senior management teams. This further instils a culture of learning in the business, displaying to existing employees the level of progression that can be achieved.

Seventy per cent of our senior management team are ex-apprentices. The majority those ex-apprentices have served their apprenticeship with us. We know that we have far more retention within that workforce as well. The achievement of the individuals, reaching higher positions within the organisation, is self-evident when we've got that many people who are ex-apprentices.

Large engineering employer

For employers in the public sector, government policy, or wider economic concerns can act as a driver for progression. One Local Authority encourages its Advanced Apprentices to consider progression to higher level qualifications in part because it wishes to develop the skills base of the workforce in its wider county economy, rather than because it strictly requires those higher level skills to function as an organisation. In this example, the Local Authority did not necessarily pay for employees to undertake higher level development, but supported it through accepting certain flexible working conditions.

The employee as a driver for progression

As well as straightforward employer drivers, the employees themselves can drive progression to higher levels. Completing an Advanced Apprenticeship may be just the first step of an individual's aspirations for personal development. In some businesses, employees do not need to continue studying, yet they choose to in order to achieve fully qualified status. Trade unions too can support this learning culture with Union Learning Agreements. Ultimately, personal motivation and a desire to progress can have an influence over an Advanced Apprentice's

progression prospects, but we must make the important proviso that this is unlikely to happen if it is not also supported by a business need.

They're given the choice, they don't have to do that if they want to remain within the business, but obviously by getting the [Honours degree] top up, that enables them to be completely qualified software engineers, so there's an incentive there, career-wise, to go ahead and do that... For the sake of another year, why not?

Large software engineering employer

The provider as a driver for progression

We did find examples of higher level skills providers themselves acting as a driver for employers to support their Advanced Apprentices to progress. In one instance a university offered a hairdressing employer to put its staff through a Foundation degree with no charge, as it was part of a pilot. This gave the employer the opportunity to support progression for which there was no strict, direct business need, as discussed in the case study below.

Higher level skills providers as a driver for progression

This company is a small chain of hair salons with around 40 employees. New hairdressing staff complete the Advanced Apprenticeship programme in hairdressing as part of their standard training. From this, staff can progress on to various teaching and assessment qualifications to support the company's internal training.

In 2006, five members of staff took a Foundation degree in Hairdressing and Salon Management with a nearby university. Although the business had not considered this type of higher level qualification as necessary for the business, the university approached the salon chain and offered the qualification for free, since it was part of a pilot.

No, we didn't go, 'Oh no we've got to do a degree.' Somebody said, 'We are piloting this [Foundation degree], would you like to do it?' And we thought, 'Oh yes, that's a good idea. You know, nobody else offers that, so let's do it.'

Although the employer was not the initial driver for undertaking the higher education, the staff who undertook the training were able to understand their roles as salon managers in a new way, as well as have the benefits and satisfaction of achieving a higher level qualification. The salon managers feel that any future progression to the Foundation degree might depend on its cost, given that it is no longer part of a subsidised pilot, but also on the needs of individual employees.

Some people need the qualification to do the job, other people do the job very well without the qualification. If it would benefit our business, I would look at the individual.

Figure 4: Case study – higher level skills providers as a driver for progression

Regulatory requirements

In certain sectors and circumstances, some employers are influenced by legal or regulatory requirements encouraging them to support their Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher levels. Professional accreditations or requirements for licences to practice act as significant incentives in some sectors. Currently childcare providers are required by law to ensure half of their staff are qualified to at least a Level 2, working towards Level 3 (the equivalent of an Advanced Apprenticeship). One childcare employer informed us that by 2015, three-quarters of business staff will be required to be trained to Level 3, with all staff at manager level achieving or working toward degree-equivalent qualifications. The feeling from this employer was that these qualification requirements were not “natural” in respect of either the business's needs or the wishes of employees.

It's not a natural progression, because people have come in to do the on-the-job training because they haven't particularly wanted to go to college and learn, and they eventually they are put in the position that actually, because of the restraints and the requirements of the sector, they have to then go on to that route...Because it is an Ofsted requirement, we've had to do that, so we probably haven't made as much profit as we wanted.

Medium-sized childcare employer

The initiator of the progression of Apprentices to higher levels of workforce development, is often directly the employer, because of a strategic requirement to “grow its own” higher level skills. In a more indirect example, the employer may stipulate that particular job roles require higher level qualifications, meaning if an apprentice wishes to progress, they must pursue this kind of development as a prerequisite. Where demand for higher level skills is less intense, some employers will wait for employees to act as the initial driver, then support those who want to progress. Other employers require an application process for progression, in order to select the best Advanced Apprentices. The initiator of progression can change over time as business circumstances change, but ultimately our employers indicated that the ideal circumstances involve employer and employee discussing and working together to initiate progression.

6 | What are the costs and benefits of progression?

This chapter examines the perceived costs and benefits to the employer of supporting Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher education. The main costs and benefits discussed are presented in the table below:

Costs	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Direct fees and co-funding contributions to higher level skills providers > Opportunity costs, including salary, loss of productive work and reorganisation of work patterns > Study materials and equipment > Travel and subsistence > Administration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Accessing higher level skills > Reducing recruitment needs > “Growing own” higher level employees who are familiar with the organisation > Increased staff motivation > Increased retention

Table 2: Costs and benefits of supporting Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher education

After considering both the costs and benefits of supporting progression, the chapter ends by exploring how employers weigh costs against benefits to make an investment decision.

The costs of progression

As we have seen in earlier chapters, the employers we consulted support progression to a range of different types of courses and qualifications, and under different circumstances. Because of this variety, the cost of supporting Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher level development also varies significantly. The type of qualification, the sector, the provider, as well as the delivery method may all impact upon the cost of higher education. Programmes that include specialist training or equipment may increase costs significantly, particularly if the needs are bespoke to one particular employer.

The most obvious component of cost for higher level development is the fees charged by higher level skills providers. These may include standard fees for learners themselves, which may be paid by the employer, as well as “co-funding” contributions in addition to fees. Estimates of fee costs ranged from zero for some employers, whose higher education was subsidised by providers or other public bodies, up to as much as £20,000 for a particular Master’s programme at a prestigious university. It is fair to say most estimates for fees were around £1000 to £1500 per year for qualifications such as HNCs, HNDs and Foundation degrees.

At least as important as these direct fees, and more important for many, is the “opportunity cost” of training – that is the costs arising as a result of an individual being absent from normal work in order to pursue higher level development. This includes their salary for time out of the office, the loss of productive work, as well as the necessary reorganisation of work patterns around study. For many employers opportunity costs are the most significant impact upon their business of supporting higher education.

The internal cost is the time and the support we don’t measure. If it’s a day release course, which is what we’re aiming for ... [or] a week’s training every so often, we’re paying them for it and we’re not getting any production out of it.

Medium sized manufacturing employer

Obviously the first [cost] is the lack of production while the individual is away from the factory, while they’re off-site. Very quickly, once they come to us from basic training, an individual is so hooked up into the

production environment, and they become a key part in whichever department they're in. To lose them for 20 per cent of their available working week has a knock on effect.

Large manufacturing employer

Obviously the greater cost is 20% of the time that individual is off work ... and if you do that over five years or four years, there is a great deal of cost in that. So the course cost is virtually insignificant. The amount of time we put in to that individual releasing him is much larger.

Large steel producer

In some cases employers are able to offset opportunity costs. One way is by requiring employees to compensate for time away from the workplace by making up hours either during, or after, the higher level course has finished, as shown in the case study below.

Mitigating the opportunity costs of progression

This company employs 900 people in the UK and manufactures turbochargers for diesel engines. The company recruits four or five Advanced Apprentices each year, focused mainly on mechanical engineering. Higher education beyond the Advanced Apprenticeship is usually automatic, with apprentices also completing a Higher National Certificate by the end of their four-year traineeship. Most of the successful candidates, around 70 per cent, will then continue on to a Higher National Diploma in Mechanical Engineering, lasting one year. Employees may continue to be sponsored in higher education to complete undergraduate degrees, particularly Bachelor's degrees in Engineering.

Programmes are delivered by means of day-release from the workplace, meaning additional opportunity and resource costs for the employer. However, this is mitigated in part by the company's requiring employees to work additional hours after the delivery of higher level programmes, in order to make up half of the hours lost during programme delivery.

At the end of their apprenticeship, so those that then go on to do degrees and things like that, we then ask them to work half of their hours back during the week. So, if we give them six hours off, we ask them to do three hours during the week to work back some of the time, bearing in mind we are still paying £2000 a year for them to go to university.

Figure 5: Case study – mitigating the opportunity costs of progression

In addition to direct fees and time away from the workplace, employers may have to cover the cost of course materials, travel and subsistence, administration and equipment for employees undertaking higher level development. For example, one childcare employer provides a learning suite and laptops for staff undertaking Foundation degrees in order to facilitate their study. Such expenditure can be significant when many employees are undertaking training, but economies of scale may be useful for reducing materials expenditure. This is demonstrated well by a large steel manufacturer that keeps an open library of course materials, which can be used by staff on training courses, and then returned when they complete the course. Another large engineering employer provides online e-library facilities, to allow a significant number of employees access to a repository of books and learning resources, which again helps to reduce materials costs. However, such facilities will require sufficient volumes of progression to be worth the investment, and therefore may not be viable for smaller employers.

We don't pay travel expenses or we don't pay the costs of textbooks. We have an online system here that all employees have access to. So, they have online access to, literally, hundreds of thousands of online textbooks that they can access.

Large engineering employer

Several employers feel that it very difficult to take account of all the costs of higher education, such as support for employees or time away from the workplace, because it is difficult to catalogue every single component of cost. Thus, although exact costs may be produced for course fees and time away from the workplace, many components of cost go unquantified and are sensed in a more qualitative way.

We appreciate there are opportunity costs, because obviously while the technician is training here, there is the cost of [supervising] that technician and the time it takes. Then you have opportunity costs that are attached to the various people's time who have a little bit to do with the scheme... They all spend a little bit of time on that, but we don't look to capture that as a separate item, because it's kind of not real money. It's kind of a bit of a futile exercise to spend too much time trying to put a number on that.

Large car manufacturer

We don't measure the internal costs. They're quite difficult to measure, so we decided there was no point in doing so.

Medium-sized manufacturing employer

Nevertheless, we asked all respondents to estimate the total cost per employee for Apprenticeship progression to higher levels, including any direct or indirect costs. Estimates varied considerably, up to tens of thousands of pounds, if salary costs are included. It is important to note that despite the magnitude of some of these estimates, cost is not necessarily a barrier, particularly for these employers who have successfully supported staff progression. Ultimately, the majority of employers we consulted accept covering the costs described here as an *investment*, which will generate business benefits.

The benefits of progression

In most circumstances, employers will invest in higher education only if they can see a benefit to the business. Just as the principal driver for investment in progression is a business need for higher level skills, so the principal benefit is obtaining those skills. Employers see investment in higher level skills as a way to maintain a skilled, high performance workforce, with the associated benefits that brings. In some sectors, strong technical or professional skills and knowledge underpinned by ongoing learning is necessary in order to function or compete. By ensuring that staff are highly-skilled, employers can ensure that productivity, efficiency and profitability are maintained. Employers also benefit from knowing that their staff are appropriately skilled to a recognised standard.

I think, first and foremost, we get people with the right skills. We're ... making sure that our skills profile is meeting our requirement, to ensure that we meet these ... targets, and the resource requirements of the site.

Large engineering employer

There are a whole set of benefits we've realised as a result of it, from, if you like, lines running better, machines running better, new techniques being implemented.

Medium-sized manufacturing employer

What we feel is, [an HNC] improves their problem solving skills. It increases the flexibility of mind-sets. They don't just see themselves being

a craftsman, they see that they can go further than that. We find that ... they are more amenable to change, they're more adaptive to problems that occur in the work area. They've got a greater level of knowledge to apply to the work that they carry out. So all round we find that they are much superior craftsmen than we would get without that qualification.

Large power producer

One of the key benefits, particularly for those employers that have a traineeship programme encompassing both an Advanced Apprenticeship and a higher level qualification, is guaranteeing a supply of skilled labour that may be difficult to recruit from external labour markets. In several cases, we found that higher education is preferred over recruiting graduates or skilled professionals externally. For some engineering employers, growing their own higher level skills fills the associate professional or technician roles that may not always be suited to graduates recruited directly from university. What is more, employees with higher level skills developed internally are more likely to be work ready and familiar with the organisation and its culture and work practices. The case study below explores some of these issues. Often employers use both graduate recruitment and internal progression to develop organisational higher level skills.

If we don't grow our own, then there won't be enough out there, and then I guess the other side is that we want a very specific, multi-skilled technician who can do both electrical and mechanical. The best way of getting the right calibre of people is to grow our own.

Large car manufacturer

This concept of “growing one’s own” talent, rather than recruiting, applies equally to the future leaders and managers of these organisations. Once an individual has made the initial steps to higher level development, it can often lead to further development later in their career. Externally recruited staff may need significant time to adapt to new roles and organisations. Progressing former apprentices, over several years, to fill senior posts can often be preferable, because they are already accustomed to the organisation’s working practices and understand the employer from the bottom up.

The benefits to us, is to have home grown leaders within the business. If we bring external people in into the business then it's going to be at least three to six months before they are up to speed with what we do as a business. Never mind about the processes that we have, or the culture, or those sorts of things, so I think if we've got people being grown inside the business than that saves us a lot of time and money when we are recruiting externally.

Large engineering employer

Benefits of apprentice progression over external recruitment

This company is a multinational automotive manufacturing employer operating in nearly 20 countries. The organisation has a workforce of approximately 6000 in the UK, and recruits approximately 25 Advanced Apprentices each year. Apprentices progress to Foundation degrees within the first five years of employment with the company. The company attributes its commercial success to the quality and productivity of its staff.

We're the most productive car plant in Europe and in the top ten in the world, and, fundamentally, the only difference is our people and how we train them... our ultimate goal is that there will come a time when all our 300 or 400 technicians are ex-apprentices.

For this employer, there are distinct benefits to progressing apprentices over recruiting externally. Consistently higher performance, ability and output is noted in technician staff who trained on the Apprenticeship scheme. Monitoring of staff appraisals confirms that ex-apprentices perform significantly better than non-apprentices: at least 58% of ex-apprentice technicians perform above expected performance, compared to 45% for other members of staff.

Furthermore, the company struggles to identify and recruit suitable external candidates of as high a calibre as their own internally developed technicians.

Our best performing technicians are the ones who have come through our internal scheme. Ex-apprentices, tend to be in the upper quartile. So they are significantly better performers than someone who was taken off the street, in general... We struggle to recruit technicians from outside, because they are not the calibre that we are looking for [and] when we get them they don't perform as well as our apprentices, or our ex-apprentices.

Advanced Apprentices who progress and develop in this way become a valuable asset, and as such, are often targeted for recruitment by other companies. While this may hold a risk (in terms of retention and a maintaining a return on training investment), the benefits of investing in home-grown apprentices are clear.

Figure 6: Case study – benefits of apprentice progression over external recruitment

Increased staff motivation and retention are also discussed by employers as important benefits of supporting Advanced Apprentices to progress on to higher levels. Higher level development provides a tangible benefit to the employee, in gaining a recognised qualification. Employee confidence, academic ability, and adaptability all increase when higher level training is provided. The employee is more motivated as a result of undertaking training, and the employer benefits from having keen, loyal staff with higher skills and abilities.

I think from a motivational aspect with regards to employee relations ... the individual that's going on to higher level qualifications can see that the company wants to progress them [and] invest in them.

Large engineering employer

We retain 90 per cent of our apprentices. One of the reasons why we retain them is obviously we are a good employer and the willingness to sponsor them through higher education.

Large engineering employer

Some employers fear a downside of investment, that staff may leave the organisation having achieved higher level skills and therefore become more employable. Overall though, this factor

was judged as less significant than the benefit of retaining staff who can see they are being invested in.

Whereas some companies and some people would suggest, well, if you give them a transportable qualification, they'll walk off and take the qualification with them. I don't believe that; I believe that has the reverse effect. People look at us and think, 'You know what, I can gain these qualifications there. It will have a lot of value to me and I should try and get in with [them], because it is a good company.'

Large steel producer

Making an investment decision: weighing up costs and benefits

We asked the employers how they approach the decision of whether or not to invest in higher education, and how they weigh anticipated costs against benefits. Overall we found few examples of employers able to do this in an exact way, with employers more commonly making rougher estimations. This is mainly because of the difficulty of quantifying and monetising every component of cost and every benefit. Despite this, some employers are certainly interested in generating a figure for return on investment and thereby justify training expenditure more clearly.

It's not something we do at the moment, and I believe it's something we should be doing... How are we actually indicating that we are getting that return on our investment? So, yes, it's something we are actually not exploring currently, but we will be.

Large software engineering employer

Employers will typically form a business case for any significant investment, using historical reasoning to justify the higher level workforce development. However, this is often a qualitative, rather than quantitative process. For many employers though, their “ball-park” estimates for costs and benefits are more than enough to make an informed decision on investment. Much of the reasoning comes back to the drivers for investment discussed in the previous chapter. The requirement to grow higher level skills internally is often not a luxury but a need – the business could not function or compete without it.

There is a need for a business case, which comes out of looking at the improvements and discussing, if you like, what benefits we've had. As I said, some of the benefits are very hard to quantify. The fact that we've got more machine uptime is very hard to turn into a financial value. So you can quantify that benefit, but then when you come to financial value, it's arguable what it's worth.

Medium-sized manufacturing employer

It's quantifiable only in terms of them staying longer and being better managers in the future. That's very difficult to quantify.

Large manufacturing employer

We don't see it as a cash cost-benefit issue with the HNC. We see that there are a lot of intangible benefits. Because we have done this for a lot of years, I can track this situation back to 1970. We can see the benefits of the HNC historically and that's why we do it. We're not interested that we can't demonstrate a cash benefit.

Large power producer

For some employers investing in workforce development is part of organisational culture and self identity. An ingrained culture of training and development may even override any consideration about cost and benefit, as illustrated by one large engineering firm:

We don't really go through detailed business case justifications for it each year. It's just, 'This is who we are, this is what we do,' and apprentices are a part of our DNA and without them, this firm would probably have shut down 20 years ago. So, it depends what the cost of that might have been.

Large engineering employer

7 | What are the barriers and enablers to supporting progression?

When an employer does decide to progress their employees on to higher education, not only do they have to overcome barriers emerging from their own internal business circumstances, but also barriers from the side of providers and the employees themselves. To overcome these barriers our employers identify a series of good practice enablers that they have found assisted progression in their organisation.

This chapter discusses examples of barriers and enablers to progression from three perspectives:

- > The employer
- > The provider
- > The employee

The chapter ends by considering the employers' intentions for supporting progression in the future.

The employer

There are various barriers and enablers of progression rooted in employers themselves. Most fundamentally, demand for skills within a given company may not be high enough to support the progression of Advanced Apprentices. Many organisations function by maintaining a particular mix of higher, intermediate and lower skills, and so train Advanced Apprentices for the very reason that their business has a definite need for the intermediate level skills these qualifications bring. Thus we do see cases where employers cannot support some or all Advanced Apprentices to progress, because they do not have a sufficiently high need for higher level *over* intermediate skills. Supporting former Advanced Apprentices to pursue higher education in these circumstances would mean that there is unlikely to be a corresponding change in job role, unless and until a vacancy becomes available. Unless pursuing a policy of growth, a nursery chain for example only needs a certain number of higher level qualified staff to support its business model.

There's obviously room for progression within the company. However, we've only got seven positions for nursery managers, seven deputies and so on.

Medium-sized childcare employer

Ultimately a secure, defined future for the business enables employers to invest in their staff with the confidence that the demand for higher level skills will be maintained over the period of higher education. A defined skills gap certainly helps to make the case for staff development, but employers also have to see that training internally is the best way to fill that gap, rather than the alternative of recruitment; recruiting graduates or experienced personnel who already have higher level skills can be quicker and sometimes cheaper than internal training.

I think that for progression to happen you have to foresee a discernable skills gap that needs to be plugged and that you evaluate the best way to plug it would be through supporting post-Apprenticeship individuals through [higher education]. But because of the timescales involved, it doesn't always happen. ... certainly at this point in time it's not difficult at all to get really good, focused, high calibre graduates straight from university with Master's degrees.

Large engineering employer

On a practical level, it may be difficult to manage large proportions of staff embarking on higher education at the same time. As well as the direct costs involved with this process, employers recognise the importance of providing adequate mentoring and support for employees studying at higher levels for the first time. For some employers, investing in this kind of supervisory time is a real barrier. Several engineering employers note that supporting staff to progress to higher levels means investing time mentoring them into their new role even after training has finished. The employers agree that it is crucially important to have adequate support mechanisms in place for employees who are undertaking higher level development, particularly those who are unlikely to have studied at this level in the past. The capacity to provide this mentoring and work experience will vary from employer to employer.

As well as providing support to employees participating in higher level development, one barrier for smaller companies in particular is affording to cover employees who are out of the workplace studying.

It's not just the funding for the qualification, it's the funding for cover and release and travel expenses and all of those things, childcare for people, you know. It shouldn't be up to the employer to pick up, even though we're a nursery, it shouldn't be up to us to provide all of that as well.

Medium-sized childcare employer

At least some time out of the workplace can be difficult to avoid for employees embarking on higher level development, although flexible delivery methods, or learning facilities on-site, can mitigate and minimise the disruption caused (see case study below). Another solution is to ask employees to make up some or all of the time lost to study at other times during the working week, as covered in an earlier case study. The same employer also finds that integrating coursework into productive work that the employee needs to do anyway can minimise disruption to the business.

We're quite good at trying to find them project work that will meet the requirements of their course, whether it's degree or HNC, but that's also meaningful to the business. So, the pressure on them is to deliver something for the business; the secondary pressure is to write it up in a way that will get them the credit that they need for their assessment.

Large engineering employer

Supporting higher level study on-site

This company was established in 1990, and delivers childcare and nursery services from seven different locations in South West England. Currently, the company employs 160 staff, around 60 to 70 per cent of whom have completed an Apprenticeship or Advanced Apprenticeship in Children's Care, Learning and Development with the company. Progression to higher level qualifications is initially to NVQ Level 4 in Children's Care, Learning and Development and then, for some, a Foundation degree in Early Childhood Studies at the Open University. The company uses the Open University specifically because of the flexibility allowed by distance learning, which employees can undertake outside core work hours.

With the Open University, that obviously puts pressure on the people that are doing it, and we wouldn't be able to afford to be able to release them on a day-to-day basis to attend universities to do their degrees that way.

To help further alleviate these problems, the company has 'Learning Zones' on all of its sites and also facilitates group-working sessions at its training centre for staff members pursuing qualifications.

Supporting higher level study on-site

Each of our nurseries has a learning zone, which is equipped with a computer which is online, a set of books and different kinds of support materials there...The people that are doing the Open University course usually...have a day a week, or a day every other week, to come into the training centre. They have a working group between them, to work on their modules.

By taking these measures and providing this support, the company is helping their employees to flourish, while overcoming one of the major organisational barriers to progression by enabling people to study while remaining on-site.

Figure 7: Case study – supporting higher level study on-site

Several, particularly larger, employers we spoke to did not feel they experienced any particular barriers to supporting progression, despite experiencing costs and we should note again that costs are not necessarily barriers. An employer can accept costs as reasonable, necessary or an investment in the future. More fundamentally, organisational culture and an attitude that supports employee development can be an important precondition for progression. Several of our employers discuss the impact that senior level buy-in to staff development can have in supporting Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher levels. Some of the best buy-in can happen when members of the organisation's senior management team are ex-apprentices themselves, as is the case in several employers we interviewed.

The provider

Our employers emphasise how important it is to have a positive, open relationship with higher level skills providers. Employers find it helpful to have regular communication to monitor employees' progress on courses and to ensure that the providers understand business priorities. Before progression to higher levels even occurs, it is important that Apprenticeship providers offer feedback on how employees have performed at Level 3, to make sure they are ready for higher level study. There may be advantages here to using the same provider for apprentices and higher education.

Conversely, having poor or unstable relationships with providers can be a barrier to successful progression. Sometimes communication with providers is poor, which means employers find it difficult to understand and monitor their employees' progress. Where the quality of communication or provision is judged unacceptable, several employers discuss being forced to change providers, even when this brings extra inconveniences.

To be honest with you, if there's any issues, we find out always through the apprentices; it's never through the [provider] establishments. ... I don't feel there's enough communication going on between the business and the colleges and universities at the moment.

Large software engineering employer

A lack of availability of suitable courses can be a major barrier to progressing Advanced Apprentices in some industries. Several engineering employers explained to us how difficult it can be to source appropriate courses, both in terms of subject area and delivery method. Some employers explained that while universities and colleges may be excellent at teaching academic aspects of programmes, some can struggle with practical elements. Employers noted that it is important for providers to maintain up-to-date equipment and staff by working closely with employer clients. Where a lack of suitable courses is a barrier, very large employers can invest in providers so that they can access the provision they want, as is the case with one large employer that has made a significant investment in a local university. However, this is not often an option for smaller companies with far fewer learners. Even where the right courses exist, they may be in high demand and oversubscribed, meaning places on the course may be difficult to secure.

We needed two people to get on to an HNC in mechanical engineering and the local college ... course was almost 95 per cent full, before they even advertised it. Now, when you've then got about 20 engineers also wanting to go on to it, you start having problems.

Large engineering employer

Higher level skills providers' ability to deliver flexibly is a crucial enabler of progression, which can help to overcome employers' difficulties with releasing staff from the workplace. This could be as simple as offering flexibility over the day of the week courses are offered on, or if and how they can be studied part-time. The best delivery solution will vary from employer to employer. In most cases we found employers opting for day release study, but one employer finds releasing employees in a single "block" period of time, is more convenient than releasing them for a day a week, particularly when employees are out "in the field". Having providers located nearby is another straightforward enabler, and, as mentioned previously, some employers with several sites will use multiple providers, so that providers are close to the workplace where they are delivering. Where nearby providers cannot be sourced, distance learning may be a good solution to geographical barriers.

Another enabler mentioned by two employers was the support of intermediary organisations, such as Sector Skills Councils and Foundation Degree Forward. These organisations can act as a useful link between the two worlds of business and higher education.

The employee

Even where barriers related to the employer and provider can be overcome, there may also be barriers relating to employees themselves. Progression often depends on the competency of individual employees – it can be a large step from an Advanced Apprenticeship to higher levels qualifications, especially with regard to mathematics, English and self-guided learning. One employer points out that when recruiting an apprentice at a lower level, it may be difficult to predict whether that person will be suitable for progression to higher levels later in their career.

We are second guessing people's abilities at aged 16 to be able to work and compute at degree level and that's not always a correct assumption. We might get it right nine times out of ten, but one time out of ten, you're going to get someone who's just not there.

Large engineering employer

The transition to a more self-guided style of working can also be difficult for some former Advanced Apprentices. An employer in the childcare sector feels that a bridging course between Level 3 and higher levels is useful to introduce former Advanced Apprentices to higher level skills they may not yet have developed. Another employer notes the differences between further education at Level 3 and higher level development:

I think when they're at college, the college are very directive about what you have to do ... chasing them all the time. University is very different; the university attitude is almost, 'Well, I'll tell you what you have to do, but if you don't do it, that's up to you, and I'm not going to chase you.' So there is a very different mindset in the university approach and the college approach

Large car manufacturer

Recruiting high quality, capable staff who want to progress can be an issue, particularly when the employer is not close to large cities. Several employers discuss working on the "pipeline" of talent, by working with schools and colleges to ensure the apprentices they do recruit

understand their industry and are ultimately suitable for progression. This can include helping schools deliver more vocationally oriented courses, such as the GCSE in engineering.

Some employers feel that certain apprentices “plateau” at a particular level of ability, and are therefore not suited to progression to higher levels. Some will use tests or monitor previous study or work to make a judgement about whether the individual is suited to higher level development. Ultimately employers want to avoid “setting people up to fail”. Equally, employees themselves can decide when they have progressed to the level at which they are comfortable. Some Advanced Apprentices simply do not wish to progress to higher levels, or do not feel capable of higher level study.

It's unusual for someone to take on a course and then just fail it. What you tend to find is in the preceding years, so let's say they're moving from HNC to HND, if they're struggling in their final year or HNC, they will have managed their own expectations by saying, 'Do you know what? I might just scrape through this HNC; I'm not really going to be cut out to do the next level up.' They will set that expectation for themselves.

Large engineering employer

Importantly, employers feel that higher level qualifications are not always necessary to progress through job roles; in many ways work experience and ability are more useful and can have a greater impact on an individual's development than qualifications.

I feel that actually, a qualification doesn't actually enable you to take on a job role. I think experience and practice also have to come into it. So just because you've got that qualification doesn't necessarily make you a good manager or deputy.

Medium-sized childcare employer

Because of the importance of work experience, progression through formal qualifications can work better later in careers, once the former apprentice has built experience, or, in some sectors, established themselves with clients so that they are earning enough to cover their salary. This also helps to overcome the barrier mentioned previously of the step from Advanced Apprenticeship frameworks to higher education being too high.

It's not an immediate progression. It tends to be: you become an apprentice, you get your experience, you get signed off, you earn your stripes and do the role for two, three, four years to gain credibility within your discipline. Gain the experiential learning and demonstrate your commitment and desire to be with the company. ... Then you start to invest in putting them on further education, higher education training courses.

Large engineering employer

For the purposes of this research, it is interesting to note that employers generally have the perception that Advanced Apprentices are just as capable of progressing to higher levels as anyone else, despite sometimes needing bridging courses or work experience before progressing higher.

The anecdotal stuff is that the ones that do progress to degree level do exceptionally well. ... On the whole they're doing equally as others who have gone through the traditional route.

Large engineering employer

Former apprentices have the potential to progress

This engineering company employs around 11,000 people in the UK, and 600 apprentices. Of that cohort, approximately 570 are on Advanced Apprenticeship programmes – either on a technical or practical route – and the remaining 30 are on a Higher Apprenticeship framework.

The company's Apprenticeship is renowned, and progression to higher level qualifications is a key part of this. Around half of the Advanced Apprentices can expect to go on to achieve a full degree by the time they are 30. A select few can expect to go even further than that, being earmarked for the company's Leadership Scheme and put through a Master's in Engineering Business Management at a Russell Group university. In October 2010 there were four individuals enrolled on the programme, providing an example of former Advanced Apprentices reaching the highest standards of UK higher education.

We're asking them to go to [the] University, which is a top six university in the UK, and then they take a Master's degree. These are people who are at a much earlier stage than [the University] usually gets on to these programmes. Normally the people who get on to [their] Master's programmes are mid to late twenties; most of them have got a first degree. The guys that we're putting through haven't got a first degree. They've either got a foundation degree or HNC. They are performing exceptionally well, achieving well above expectations. We've got lots of evidence of their ability to cope with that level of qualification.

The process is all part of the ethos at the company, where former Apprentices also demonstrate their progression within the company as well as in terms of qualifications. The nature of the Master's programme provides an indication of the future roles intended for these individuals, as they broaden their expertise from core engineering to management skills:

The ethos that [we] have got for developing people as far as they can go results in figures, that we've got, of around 30% of our very senior managers having come through [the Apprenticeship] route. So, because we're such a large, global organisation, they can meet all their career aspirations within the company.

Figure 8: Case study – former apprentices have the potential to progress

One specific barrier mentioned by employers is a lack of knowledge on the part of apprentices about certain aspects of studying at higher levels, particularly around any available financial support. The solution here seems to be directing employees to quality sources of information, advice and guidance, which may be easily accessible, such as online resources. Businesses were keen for individuals to take some of the responsibility for supporting their own development. The case study below illustrates how one public sector employer emphasises the importance of quality information, advice and guidance.

Overcoming barriers with information, advice and guidance

This Local Authority employs several hundred Advanced Apprentices in a range of business areas, including Business Administration and Customer Service. On finishing the Advanced Apprenticeship, employees are offered access to high quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) from the Council's own Adult and Community Services team. This helps to raise awareness about available options, to ensure individuals make informed career decisions. Of the cohort of Advanced Apprentices, the Council estimates that half have followed a route that takes them into some form of part-time higher education.

Each of those [Advanced Apprentices] has had access to very professional, customised, one-to-ones and IAG. If it's appropriate for

Overcoming barriers with information, advice and guidance

them, and if it's right for the organisation as well, they do Level 4 qualifications [and above], including degrees, on a part-time basis.

Previous research with learners has consistently shown that a barrier to Apprentices' progression is a lack of understanding about the opportunities available. The Local Authority has recognised this, as the purpose of the IAG is explained:

It's basically giving people the information about what is available to them. ... Some people feel that there is only the traditional academic route into HE, and if they're not typically academic in mindset, you may go down that route and not enjoy it and ultimately drop out. It's really opening up the idea that there is a different route to get the same goal and that maybe a vocational route is more appropriate for somebody.

The IAG, which is offered by the Student Services department at the Council, includes discussion about an apprentice's aspirations, their career path and potential sources of funding for their progression to higher education. The Council provides a contribution where there is a clear business need, but also encourages Apprentices to access public funding for their own individual personal development.

Figure 9: Case study – overcoming barriers with information, advice and guidance

Finally, financial barriers may also exist for the former Advanced Apprentices themselves. Although the majority of the employers we spoke with pay their employees' fees for higher level development, they did suggest that employees may need to sacrifice overtime or salary progression in order to study, potentially creating financial barriers to progression.

For them to come off productive work, where they're earning that amount of money, to drop into a classroom on basic salary, no overtime, no bonus payments [is a financial cost to the employee].

Large engineering employer

The challenge to the young people, is that the [Higher Apprenticeship] programme is for a further two years, and obviously they're on Apprenticeship salaries during those two years. Whereas they could be earning ... certainly about £30,000 a year, out in the business as a fuel fitter. There is a financial implication.

Large engineering employer

Looking forward

Almost all the employers intend to continue to support their Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher levels in the future. Because of the drivers we discussed earlier, in particular a business need for higher level skills, many employers feel that they must continue to support progression to ensure access to these skills in the future. Several employers are considering expanding the volume of progression, or creating more formalised and managed processes for staff development. Although some smaller companies feel they could be held back by costs, particularly where they do not see clear benefits or return for that cost, others emphasised that, although they currently receive government funding, they would ultimately cover the cost of higher education, should that funding be cut in future.

We say we will continue even if the funding ceases, which potentially it could, we don't know. It will continue. Whether it would continue on the same scale, I don't know. ... If we want to be at the forefront as a leader of innovation and everything, then we have to do this.

Large engineering employer

Given the low rates of Advanced Apprentices progressing on to higher education, we asked the employers about how progression rates might be increased. One important response is to look at the business itself, its operating model and how it uses the skills of its staff. This research has suggested that particular sectors tend to encourage their Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher levels, because they have a defined need for higher level skills that cannot be met through recruitment alone. This is not necessarily the case for all sectors and types of business; as we have seen in previous research, many businesses are comfortable with intermediate skills and do not need higher level skills to function. Some employers in this research feel that all businesses should take an active policy of skills development in order to remain competitive in coming years.

I think businesses really need to look at the requirements of the workforce, not just now, but for the future. There are massive technological changes going on. There is going to be a demand for much higher level skilled people. If that business wants to remain competitive in the market place, then they actually need to be looking now to develop the higher level skills in the apprentices, so that they can deliver in the future so that we can, as a nation really, remain competitive.

Large engineering employer

Given that cost can be a barrier for some businesses to continue developing their staff, several employers suggested that additional government subsidies could increase the rate of higher level workforce development of former apprentices. Given the current government fiscal position, this seems unlikely to happen (with the possible exception of Higher Apprenticeships), so some employers felt that government should raise awareness of grants, loans and other support already available. One employer anticipated recent government policy announcements by suggesting that state funding should only be available for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, perhaps allowing these courses to be cheaper for individuals and employers. The employers also repeated a familiar message about simplifying the skills system to make it easier to navigate for individuals and employers.

The employers feel that schools and school careers advisers have a role to play in encouraging apprentices to progress by taking vocational routes seriously as alternatives to academic qualifications. Engineering companies felt that more able students tend to be encouraged by schools down the traditional academic (GCSE and A-level) route, rather than considering an Advanced Apprenticeship, meaning students who do take Advanced Apprentices may be less well-suited to higher level progression.

Get across the message that there are different ways to end up with a degree. ... If you're an A-level calibre person, they want you to stay on at school ... So I think it's how do we get the message across and how do we make the vocational route as attractive as the academic route? I think we have a part to play in that, but I think Government have a part to play in that as well.

Large car manufacturer

8 | Conclusions

This report has highlighted the experiences of employers that have taken *the road less travelled* by supporting their Advanced Apprentices to progress to higher education. Based on these experiences, we would highlight the following key messages:

Progression is primarily driven by business need

We have found through this research that work-based progression is primarily driven by business need. While the Government has a clear policy objective to increase the number of Advance Apprentices progressing to higher education, this objective can only be achieved by understanding the wider market context in which all businesses operate. While there is a need to improve the relevance and responsiveness of the supply side, the Government should primarily focus on creating the conditions (and removing the barriers) for businesses to invest in progressing their employees to higher levels.

Higher education can be undertaken alongside work

Higher education does not have to involve studying for an undergraduate degree on a full time basis. As the examples in this report demonstrate, a range of alternative qualification and delivery methods are available (including part time study, day release and distance learning). Providers of higher education can also work with employers to create new, relevant provision that meets business needs. Our employer examples show how Advanced Apprentices have successfully progressed to certificates, diplomas, Foundation degrees and Higher Apprenticeships. This first step of progression can then lead on to Honours or Master's degrees, and eventually even doctorates – all undertaken alongside work.

The benefits of progression can outweigh the costs

We have seen that there are significant costs to employers of supporting progression. As well as fees and co-funding contributions, which are expected to rise substantially, there are the opportunity costs of employees being away from the workplace to study. As we have seen, weighing up the costs and benefits is not always a scientific process, but, on balance, these employers all felt that the benefits outweighed the costs, and see them as investments for the future. These benefits include obtaining specific higher level skills to help the business function, as well as increased staff motivation and retention. Many employers favour growing the higher level skills of their existing staff rather than recruiting externally.

There are barriers to progression, but they can be overcome

There are barriers to progression, many of which are closely linked to cost and opportunity cost. Finding the right, relevant courses, delivered in flexible ways by responsive providers can also prove difficult. Equally, individual Advanced Apprentices may not always be ready for their next progression step immediately after finishing their Apprenticeship. As this research has shown, employers can and do find solutions and enablers that mean progressing Advanced Apprentices to higher education is not only realistic, but has become a core part of their human resources and internal skills strategies. By showcasing the examples in this research, we hope to raise both awareness and expectations of the potential, and the business benefits, of Advanced Apprentices' progression to higher education.