Building Pathways: Employer Views of Apprentice Progression to Higher Education



Tamsin Bowers-Brown Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University A report prepared for Building Pathways September 2005

PROGRESSION

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Abstract

In 2004, the Centre for Research and Evaluation (CRE) at Sheffield Hallam University conducted interviews with 44 construction and engineering apprentices to identify whether they felt there were any barriers that would prevent them from progressing to higher education (Bowers-Brown, 2004). The research highlighted the importance of the employers' role in enabling apprentices to progress further with their studies and to higher levels of education. For this reason the Building Pathways Project commissioned a further piece of research that aimed to identify employers' perceptions of the Apprenticeship and of higher-level courses.

Twenty-eight senior managers in twenty-four companies based predominantly in South Yorkshire and North-East Derbyshire were interviewed for the purpose of this research. The companies were in the construction and engineering sectors and all employed apprentices. The companies varied in size; the smallest was based on one site and employed three people whereas the largest was a multi-national firm with several sites, employing 49,000 people globally. The number of apprentices employed also varied from one to five hundred.

Employers valued the apprenticeship as a method of recruiting and training new staff. However, there was no consensus concerning the standard of the apprentices who applied for positions at the different companies. For some employers the standard was seen to be extremely high, whilst for others there was a concern that the standard had declined in recent years. A number of employers aligned this perceived decline in standards with the push towards increased participation in higher education; in particular with a bias towards academic rather than vocational education at an earlier stage. Some employers felt that brighter school pupils were being advised to pursue A levels rather than alternative being given information about vocational programmes. Consequently certain employers felt that they were left with students who were the least able of their cohort and who did not necessarily have an interest in the

subject. A number of employers were of the view that the vocational route was seen to be the option for those who are less academically bright, rather than being valued in its own right and as an equal alternative to the A level.

Certain employers encouraged participation in higher education, with some specifically recruiting apprentices who they felt would be able to make this progression. Those employers who supported apprentices to progress to higher-level courses stated they would offer time off work to attend classes and/or payment of course tuition fees.

However, not all employers supported apprentice progression to higher education. This was largely because there were no appropriate job vacancies for employees who were educated to such a high level within the company, or if there were, these vacancies were already filled.

Several employers realised that they needed to allow apprentices to progress to higher education to meet the skills needs of the company. One employer felt that if higher education was not on offer, he would have more difficulty attracting school-leavers to take the Apprenticeship route. Conversely, there was a concern amongst some employers that employees who had progressed from an Apprenticeship to higher-level courses would leave the company once they were better qualified.

Overall there was a lot of support for apprentices who wanted to progress to higher education in both the construction and engineering sectors. It should be noted that the achieved sample is likely to be biased towards those companies who support training, as those who do not were probably less likely to agree to participate.

Background

Building Pathways is a further and higher education widening participation partnership project, based at Sheffield Hallam University. The project has been in existence since 1999 and has a focus on developing and promoting progression opportunities to higher education for under-represented groups, particularly those on work-related and work-based learning programmes. The project is funded by the Partnership for Progression in South Yorkshire as well as Integrated Aimhigher uplift funding.

In 2004, the Building Pathways Project team commissioned the Centre for Research and Evaluation (CRE) to explore the potential barriers apprentices faced when considering progression to higher education. A key finding of the Apprenticeship research was that progression to higher education, from the apprentice route, largely depended on the skills needs of the employer for whom the apprentice was working. Varying experiences as voiced by the apprentices led us to question whether employer attitudes were similar across the sectors (Bowers-Brown, 2004; Bowers-Brown & Berry, 2005). Therefore, it was felt that the employers' perspectives of higher-level skills and the potential for apprentices to progress within these companies should be explored. This paper presents the findings of interviews with senior managers or employers in construction, engineering and manufacturing companies based largely in South Yorkshire and north-east Derbyshire.

The Skills Agenda

The value of apprenticeships is something that has re-emerged on the policy agenda over the past two years. The government sees the Apprenticeship as a vital element in improving the skills of the workforce to meet the needs of industry:

We want apprenticeships to be the primary work-based vocational route for young people, giving them an excellent skills foundation, and designed with employers. Our target is that by 2004, 28% of young people will start on a Modern Apprenticeship by the age of 22 (DfES, 2003b:79)

This is re-emphasised in the latest White Paper '*Getting on in Business, Getting on at Work*:

We want to increase by 75%, between 2002/03 and 2007/08, the numbers successfully completing Apprenticeships, as the main work-based route for young people to gain employment skills. By July this year, we are aiming to increase to 28% the proportion of young people who enter an Apprenticeship before the age of 22 – some 175,000 young people (DfES, 2005b)

Furthermore, employers across several sectors recognise the significance of the Apprenticeship in meeting their skills needs; for example British Telecom has calculated a net profit of more than £1,300 per apprentice per year when compared with non-apprentice recruitment (Hope, 2005).

The recent White Paper *14-19 Education and Skills* (DfES, 2005a) emphasises the importance of Apprenticeships in forming part of a new vocational curriculum. Emphasis is placed on the necessity to ensure that vocational routes become more valued, rather than an inferior form of education when measured against the A level as the gold standard:

Our next requirement for achieving this vision is that there should be much stronger vocational routes to success, which are genuinely valued by employers, and as providing access to higher education. This has been the historic weakness of our education system: not merely that vocational routes are seen by many young people as second class, but also that they are not seen by employers and universities as a sound preparation (DfES, 2005a). The Apprenticeship will be extended as part of the revised vocational curriculum for 14-19 year olds; it will be offered from age 14 and will provide a clearer pathway into higher education for those taking this route:

We want the Apprenticeship approach to be available from Young Apprenticeships for 14-16 years olds, through Apprenticeships (Level 2) and Advanced Apprenticeships (Level 3), to Level 4 Higher Education qualifications. (DfES, 2005b)

However, participation in the Apprenticeship will not be restricted to younger people; adult apprenticeships are also being developed. The government states it will develop trials of Apprenticeships for adults in three sectors: health and social care, construction, and engineering, to apply the principles of Apprenticeships to the training needs of adults (DfES 2005b).

Improving vocational education opportunities is also linked to the agenda to increase and widen participation in higher education. At the current time, approximately 90 per cent of those on conventional A level programmes enter higher education, compared with only 40 to 50 per cent of those qualifying at Level 3 in vocational subjects (HEFCE, 2004). The number of Advanced Apprentices who progress to higher education is unknown because there is no official requirement to record this information. For those Advanced Apprentices who do progress it is the NVQ at level 3 or the BTEC qualification that is recorded as the admissions requirement for higher education. This poses concern for those who advise Advanced Apprentices about progression opportunities, as there is no quantitative information about apprentices' destinations after completing higher education and ultimately about the advantages higher education can deliver.

The development of the Foundation degree provides students that have taken the Apprenticeship route with a higher education qualification that fits more closely with the mode of learning with which they are familiar. A survey conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency suggests that students on Foundation degrees generally progress from vocational routes (QAA, 2005). According to the DfES' Foundation degree website, Foundation degrees are a vocational higher education qualification that provides students with the specialist technical knowledge and skills needed by employers at the associate professional and higher technician level (DfES, 2005c). Graduate Prospects (2005) reports that there are over 150 Foundation degree courses in engineering and over 100 for building construction and property.

Foundation degrees are often developed in partnership between educational institutions and industry:

An overarching priority is to ensure that Foundation degrees are developed to meet industry requirements that they are in alignment with Occupational Standards and, where appropriate, linked to and supported by industry professional institutions and other providers in the region (Stoney & Hudson, 2004)

In 2004, 280 Foundation degrees were awarded in engineering and 40 in the architecture, building and planning subject area (HESA, 2005). However, Bowers-Brown (2004) reports that many apprentices in the construction and engineering sectors, in north-east Derbyshire and South Yorkshire, were not yet aware of the Foundation degree as a higher-education option.

The construction and engineering industries

The skills needs of the construction and engineering industries in the United Kingdom are changing greatly. The sector skills council *construction skills* states:

Industry changes will have consequences for the workforce in terms of different skill requirements – in particular, the gradual trend away from manual labour and towards white-collar workers/technical staff will continue. (NB this is an overall trend which disguises continued growth in certain manual/ occupations at craft level.) On site there will be a need for higher-level assembly skills. Business management generally will become more critical for company success, in particular, through the adoption of new ICT systems. The move towards a fully qualified

workforce, driven by demands for quality assurance, will represent a significant extra training requirement for the industry. (Construction Skills, 2003)

The case is similar for the engineering sector:

Skill shortages are apparent at all levels but especially at the higher end of the occupational spectrum, among professional engineers, and also in skilled (craft) trades, and in electronics/IT skills. The main skill gaps are in specific technical and practical skills areas but personal and generic skills are also in demand (Connor *et al*, 2001).

The Engineering Employers' Federation (EEF) reports:

Raising the skills level of the workforce will therefore play a critical role in improving the productivity and competitiveness of UK manufacturing. Clearly, there is a number of ways to achieve this goal, many of them relating to education right from early school age to higher education (EEF, 2001).

This point is reiterated in the EEF manifesto in which it states that the government must:

Increase the numbers of people studying science and engineering at every level from schools to post-doctorates and encourage a greater proportion of them to work in industry (EEF, 2005).

At a regional level, the South Yorkshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC) recognises that applicants for hard-to-fill vacancies are lacking in specific skills; these include technical and practical skills, particularly in the construction and manufacturing sectors (LSC, 2004). Furthermore, throughout Yorkshire and Humber it was found that skills shortages are commonly reported in the construction sector, whilst manufacturers experience difficulties in recruiting employees with the appropriate skills mix for modern engineering processes (CI research, 2003). The LSC estimates that, by 2010, South Yorkshire

manufacturing employers will require 70% of the sector to be qualified to at least NVQ3 (LSC, 2005).

Although the need for higher–level skills at a macro–level is apparent, this report provides a micro-level analysis to explore qualitative responses to employers' skills needs. The views expressed in this report are taken from qualitative interviews at twenty-five companies with twenty-eight senior managers or employers (both SMEs and multinational organisations) in the north of England.

Methodology

Building Pathways specifically wanted to explore the views of employers in the construction and engineering industries about their perceptions of the need for higher-level skills in the workplace and whether there were barriers that would prevent them from allowing apprentices to progress.

The Building Pathways project has a sub-group that deals with curriculum issues for the engineering and construction sectors. The curriculum group comprises representatives from the local universities, further education colleges, the Learning and Skills Council and the Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in manufacturing. With the assistance of the curriculum group, employers with work-based learners at Barnsley College, Doncaster College, Rotherham College of Arts and Technology, Sheffield College and Chesterfield College were identified. Furthermore, the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) and EEF identified employers who they felt would be willing to participate in the research. The CITB contacted some employers by telephone and gained their agreement to participate.

An invitation to participate in the research was sent out to more than 400 employers. Approximately 20 employers were contacted by telephone as their contact addresses were unavailable. The invitation requested that employers contact the research team to arrange a time that was suitable for them to be interviewed. In total 28 people were interviewed in 25 companies.

Table 1	:	Respondents	by	sector
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Construction	Engineering	Total
13	12	25

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face or by telephone. An interview schedule was used as a guide and the questions often deviated from this, as a result of the discussion. Therefore, the interview findings are set out in themes rather than by question order. The employers who participated in the research were generally supportive of training and staff development. Of the engineering employers, five had the Investors in People award and one employer was working towards achieving it. Of the construction employers, four employers had achieved the award, two were working towards it and one employer implemented the systems (Table 2). The Investors in People award is a good indicator that a company is committed to staff development and training.

	Investors in People				
	Yes	No	Working towards it	Implementing the systems	Missing response
Construction	4	7	2	1	1
Engineering	5	4	1	-	1

Table 2. Do you have the Investors in People Award?

The Apprenticeship

There was a mixed use of the term 'Apprenticeship'. For one employer an apprenticeship meant using higher-education students on work-placements, rather than the official Apprenticeship programme. However, the results reported in this research are based on the Apprenticeship and Advanced Apprenticeship programmes. These programmes comprise National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), key skills qualifications and, in most cases, a technical certificate such as a BTEC or City & Guilds. The Apprenticeship is delivered by the college or through a work-based training provider in partnership with the employer.

Recruitment

Employers were asked about their recruitment procedures, in particular what they saw to be the essential criteria in recruiting apprentices and specifically whether aptitude, experience or qualifications were of greatest importance. These questions often resulted in a general discussion about recruitment. Many employers had experienced difficulties in recruiting apprentices and this was related to several factors: the appeal of jobs in the industry; redundancies, particularly in the engineering sector, in earlier decades; the push towards increased participation in higher education via the academic route and a bias against vocational options in careers information, advice and guidance. The following section outlines respondents' opinions on these issues.

For some employers there was a feeling that industry was not appealing enough to attract young people. This was seen to be due to both a lack of knowledge about the job roles available and the opportunities apprentices can pursue later on.

I mean it could be the fact that the young kids of today don't appreciate the quality of engineering. You know it's a dead-end job as it were. That's their impression, but obviously in our eyes it isn't. You know, we insist on these guys going through a four or five-year course and we're offering them a future and I don't think they realise what they're giving up, you know. (Engineering employer) One employer found the lack of interest in the industry strange; he felt that the opportunities on offer were very good, and had improved in recent years:

Yes, you've got the chance of developing a career and still getting your degree course, but not ending up with four or five grand debt at the end of your university degree, which you have to pay back. To me, I can't understand what the problem is. When I was younger I didn't get the chance of going to university, but if I had have done and somebody had come and said to me look you can still get your degree or you come and work for us and we'll give you some money for doing it, I know which one I would have took. (Engineering/manufacturing employer)

The shortage in the number of applications to become an apprentice as well as the calibre of those who did apply was seen to be problematic. One employer identified redundancies in the engineering industry in earlier decades as a potential cause for the low level of applications received:

I think it's getting more difficult to get people of the right calibre into and interested in the industry. I think perceptions, particularly in this area, may be of high redundancies within the steel industry. It could be likely that somebody knows somebody who was made redundant with the company. (Engineering sector)

Other employers linked the shortage of apprentices with the push towards academic routes in schools. There was also seen to be a bias against vocational routes, there was a sense that the trades had been devalued and weren't treated as a serious progression option:

People who should have left at 16 are now being persuaded and cajoled in both peer pressure, parental pressure, education establishment pressure, government pressure to stay onto A Level, college or university who should really have left at 16. In the good old days, it's only going back probably 10 years, I know by experience, yeah, you would have got some very good apprentices, particularly for things like engineering and electrical apprentices. (Engineering employer)

At one time, if you was a tradesman you was really well respected, even as much so as maybe a teacher or something like that, but now there's none of that perception, but basically because the skill levels aren't there within the trades. (Construction employer)

The recent Green Paper *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2005d) emphasises the need for impartial advice for all young people on the full range of vocational and non-vocational options that are available. The introduction in 2002 of vocational

GCSEs may also lead to post-compulsory vocational options holding greater credibility.

At one company, attempts had been made to attract young people into the industry through taster-classes. Although these had been effective with some students, the classes had been stopped, due to the difficulties involved in the delivery of such events. Other employers also felt that the industry had a role to play in trying to attract younger people into the sector:

I don't think it's all the schools' fault, don't get me wrong. I think business could do a lot more to promote itself within schools. I don't think we contact the youngsters early enough. (Engineering/Manufacturing employer)

Another employer saw the 'Young Apprenticeship' as a way to reach potential candidates for the Apprenticeship at an earlier age:

It needs to start in schools and this is why the apprenticeship at age 14 is important. We need to pick people up at an earlier age, get young people at schools involved and identify the opportunities. We need to reach people before they are 16, because by that point if they haven't got a load of GCSEs they become very despondent. A change in philosophy is needed that values Engineering and doesn't see those not on an academic route as 'drop outs'. (Engineering employer)

One employer felt that the industry had to be 'sold' to parents and young people in order to attract greater numbers of students to opt for the Apprenticeship. Outlining the opportunities for progression was seen to be an important part of this process:

If you go to a young person of 16 and mum and dad and say there's an opportunity as a technician they'll not know what you're about: they're not attracted. But if you say to them there's an opportunity for a technician, which means that this is your training programme, you'll go to college one day a week, you'll do this and do that and we'll progress you to a foundation degree, then I think you stand a chance of attracting the right kind of people. It's how you sell the package. (Construction employer)

One of the respondents, who had not experienced difficulties in recruiting, attributed this to the size and reputation of the organisation. However, he expressed disappointment in the standard of the applications received.

Conversely, there were employers who were very satisfied with the apprentices they had recruited:

I'm pleased with the apprenticeship scheme, I've got two cracking lads. I think they enjoy themselves. (Construction employer)

Another company had not tried to recruit additional apprentices because of a downturn in the industry:

At the moment there are under five (apprentices). Downturn in industry, September 11th obviously that causes most problems and it's not fair really. We can't give them ... we haven't got enough staff to actually spend time with them. (Engineering employer)

The methods and criteria for recruitment varied greatly between employers. For some employers, attitude, aptitude or hobbies were crucial, whereas others expected GCSEs. In the construction industry, GCSEs were often seen to be desirable but not essential:

Enthusiasm and ability. It's nice if they do (have GCSEs), but most of them don't have them and it's not the be all and end all, although they thought it was, but it isn't, not in the building trade, it's aptitude that counts. (Construction employer)

A CITB test must be passed first, this is an aptitude test. We interview them personally and the interview must go well. We would like them to have grade C and above at GCSE but a lot of people who haven't got the grades often become good tradesmen. It depends how they come across at interview. (Construction employer)

Some companies did require candidates to have GCSEs, however the expectancy was not particularly high:

We do advertise Cs and Ds (at GCSE), but generally they need to do the maths and English from our selection tests and spatial awareness. If they interview very well and they're keen, and we've identified there are probably some basic skills they need, it doesn't mean that we wouldn't take them, but we'd give them added support. (Construction employer)

For some respondents qualifications were less important than experience; since apprentices are unlikely to have a great deal of work-experience, this is judged through hobbies. If candidates were able to demonstrate an interest or hobby in the sector, they would be considered for the placement even if they had achieved below C at GCSE in maths and English:

We're looking for a minimum of grade C in maths, English and a science. But that's not, how can I put it? We don't religiously stick to that. If I get a CV from a person that's probably got a D in Maths or a D in English, but looking at his CV I can see that he's really, really interested in this particular task, you know, he's got a hobby, he builds robots for robot wars or he's been tinkering with his dad's car for the last five years and that's what he does. If that's his hobby then, you know, we'll still look at people like that. It doesn't matter how many grades you've got. If you've already got an interest and you can see that and it's expressed at the interview stage and on the CV then these people are still worth looking at. (Construction employer)

Most employers believed it was necessary to have a mixture of personal qualities such as aptitude and interest, as well as qualifications such as GCSEs.

I don't think you can pull one out of the hat and say that's the most important: I think it's a mixture of all. Attitude definitely comes into it from what I've seen so far from young people coming into the business. A willingness, enthusiasm, ability to work as a team but also work as an individual when the need's required. They're a few things that come to mind. (Engineering/Manufacturing employer)

Ensuring that the candidates have the ability to be successful in both the practical and theoretical elements of the Apprenticeship, was seen to be an important factor when considering applications to undertake an Apprenticeship:

We tend to focus on those skills and abilities that we feel they'll need to be successful on site and integrate into the workplace and also to give them a reasonable chance to be successful on their NVQ. So it will be things like to be able to demonstrate a limited knowledge of the construction industry or the particular area they were looking to go in, having demonstrated an interest in that and also come across in sort of a positive way in the interview. Show a level of mathematical awareness and skill that will enable them to cope with the demands of the course and what they will be required to do. So it may vary slightly depending on which sort of Apprenticeship that people were actually looking at doing, plumbing, electrical, bricklaying, joinery or whatever. There might be slightly different emphasis that we put on different skills and different abilities for those different Apprenticeships. (Construction employer)

Where apprentices were seen to need extra support in certain areas some employers felt it was their duty to help the apprentices succeed. One employer provided extra tuition in non-related subjects to improve the overall awareness and level of education of the apprentice: If I can't help then I'll get them extra support, which I've done for (name of apprentice). I've taught (him) myself for four hours a week in the workshop office, maths, English, poetry, history and geography because he never went to school from being thirteen so he missed all that, so that's great. (Engineering employer)

I'm constantly in contact with the trainees on a daily basis. We have an open door policy; if they've got a problem come and see me, we'll fix it. If there's problems at college come and see us, I can arrange extra tuition if it's needed, I'm on the job in the training room, you know if you're behind on a couple of assignments and you want some time we'll make you time. We're very careful that we don't overburden the apprentices because to be perfectly honest our apprenticeship is not easy. It does require 100% commitment, but all the apprentices will get 100% commitment from the company as well. But we are also careful that we don't burn them out because at the end of three years we want somebody we can use not who's had a brain drain for the last three years and who's struggling to keep going. We are very careful on that score. (Engineering/Manufacturing employer)

Recruitment procedures ranged from personal recommendation, college, training provider or professional body recommendations, to advertising in the local press. One employer relied on the college partner to provide a list of candidates from which he would select candidates to interview for the apprentice posts.

Relationship with colleges

Respondents were asked about the types of contact or links they have with their college partners. The results were quite mixed in that some respondents were actively involved with the college, in procedures such as the review board or curriculum development, whereas others had very little contact. There were positive and negative factors in the relationships between employers and colleges. Positive elements of the relationship included the contact between the respondent and the college representative, whereas negative factors included communication problems and a lack of college events for employers to attend. This section focuses on the respondents' experiences with the colleges.

Communication with the college was a problem for some employers who felt that the college was not fulfilling its role in the partnership. Employers valued consistency in the contact with colleges, therefore, a high rate of staff turnover amongst liaison officers at the colleges was viewed as a detriment:

They send us a letter every month, asking you know, if she's had [the apprentice] any days off and we fill it in. We ask them at the end of the year to give us the days when she was at college. They couldn't do it. (Engineering employer)

The person l've been dealing with at (college) has changed recently and it's not as good a relationship as it was before. Its scuppered things, because the other chap would come in all the time, every three or four weeks. (Engineering employer)

However, some employers were very pleased with the relationship they had with the local college. Many of the employers had a named link–person who dealt with their concerns and talked to them about the apprentices' progress:

I get regular updates from the college with reports at the end of every block, every sort of term they do and we have an in house evaluation sort of process that we go through so they're interviewed by me on a regular basis and questioned on what they've been doing. (Construction employer)

I can't remember her name but she's basically an employer-apprentice liaison person. She makes sure that the lads are getting on well at college and makes sure I'm not abusing them and she's very good.... And that side of the communication from the apprentice to employer, that basis, is very, very good. (Construction employer)

The relationship with the college was very important for a number of employers; so much so, that they felt it was their responsibility to ensure that the communication with the college worked effectively. One employer explained the procedure when dealing with a new college partner:

We will start that relationship off straight away and try and maintain a fairly close relationship, build up a relationship similar to that we've got with more established colleges. With the more established colleges we can pick up the phone and ring the tutors and ask a question and then we try and build up that sort of close relationship with them. (Construction employer)

Respondents were asked about the type of contact that they thought would be useful to have with colleges. Suggestions included more engagement by the college in industry, open-days, and award ceremonies. A small number of employers felt that the college lecturers should have more engagement with industry. There are several schemes to enable lecturers to take a work placement in industry. A new national Engineering Fellowship Scheme sponsored by the Gatsby Technical Education Trust is designed to improve the quality of engineering and technology lecturers by updating their skill sets and competencies, thus ensuring that what is taught in the classroom is what industry really needs. The fellowship offers paid secondment to lecturers in further education to go into industry for three weeks to update their skills (GTET, 2005). Foundation Degree Forward offers a similar scheme but gives preference to colleges and employers that deliver, or are seeking to develop, Foundation degrees. Aimhigher South Yorkshire also offers a research placement bursary scheme; the placement offers £1000 to allow staff to have secondment from college to gain an insight into the working practices of partner organisations. It would appear that this type of scheme would be welcomed by some of the respondents:

The lecturers need to come out and see what's actually happening on the shop floor and if it means them spending a month gaining experience, two months, whatever, they should get out and do it. you have to be kept right up-to-date with modern technology. (Engineering employer)

I think the Colleges should try and keep up to date with what is going on in the industry basically. If they are putting courses together that are supposed to be designed for people to become skilled operatives within the industry, I would probably ask the question, how the heck can they do that if they never actually get out into industry? (Engineering employer)

Open days were also seen to be a positive way of improving communication between the employers and the colleges. A number of employers said that they had received invitations to such events, but many acknowledged that they had been unable to attend. Two respondents claimed that at one college the event had been cancelled as only a few employers had accepted the invitation:

I've not actually been to the college itself, you know. A tour of the facilities, workshops, whatever, would be beneficial, I would think, to see what the guys are actually doing when they're at college. (Construction employer)

Identifying what apprentices have learned at college

As apprentices learn in both the college and the workplace, respondents were asked whether they could identify what the apprentices had learned at college when they are back in the workplace. Some employers were able to identify quite clearly what the apprentices had learned. Others accepted that the course content was very different to the highly specialised processes of their company, thus, it was not practical for the apprentice to apply what had been learned at college in the work environment. For a few of the employers there was a concern that the apprentices were not gaining a broad enough understanding of the theoretical requirements involved in some of the work.

Several employers indicated that they were satisfied with the college course and that the benefits were evident in the skills the apprentice had developed:

I think it's pretty easy really because it's obvious, the way they perform, so you can see improvement after they've been. (Engineering employer)

One employer saw the college element of the apprenticeship to be

advantageous to the company and the apprentice alike:

We've got a bricklayer, he started with us, he's not been a bricklayer all his life. He started three years ago with us, or four years ago, and he did two year's training at college for his bricklaying which we paid for and that's paid dividends. It's well worth doing. It gives them the confidence as well, which is a good thing. (Construction employer)

Other respondents were more sceptical about what the apprentices had learned at college, some felt that skills did not closely relate to the job carried out in their business. One employer felt that the mismatch could be resolved if apprentices were learning solely in the workplace, with assessment also on site:

It's difficult because practical work on a building site isn't like practical work at college, they can show them the fundamentals of it but once they get on site it really isn't how it is in a college, that's the difficult part, it is not the same at all. You'd be better really having them working on site and somebody from college coming round and assessing them. (Construction employer)

Although some employers indicated it was not particularly easy to identify what the apprentices had learned at college for some respondents the concepts and theory were seen to be a good foundation: They'd learn the basics and then they'd learn the mathematics of what we do at work, but as far as actually hands-onI think it gives them a good engineering understanding. (Engineering employer)

However, others felt that the level of theory the apprentices studied was not indepth enough for the requirements of the job.

Does the curriculum meet the needs of the employer?

As there were mixed opinions about whether it was easy to identify what students had learned at college, the issue of whether the curriculum was meeting employers' needs was also of interest. One employer stated that if the apprentices had been following a curriculum that was not meeting their requirements he would go and discuss this with the college:

If that starts to be a problem, or what the college are doing appears to be miles off what we think they should be doing, then again we'll get the college in, we'll talk to the college and try and resolve and that would be (name of person) responsibility to do that. So, we wouldn't sit there and let things fall apart. (Construction employer)

Another employer felt that the apprenticeship was a foundation and that the apprentices would learn to do the specific job once they had completed the apprenticeship:

I don't know, I suppose it's like driving a car, you have your driving lessons and when you pass you learn how to drive. That's what they have to do here. They go to college, they do their apprenticeship, then they learn to do the job. I don't know, they obviously do benefit from what they're taught, I don't know. (Engineering employer)

Some employers felt that the apprenticeship allowed them choice through the NVQ modules that were available; this meant that the company could choose the modules that were most relevant to the business:

Yes I think it does, because the apprenticeship is tailored to our needs anyway. The units that are chosen for the NVQ are tailored to what we require anyway so yes, definitely. (Construction employer)

Other employers were dissatisfied with the NVQ, it was criticised for the ease of attainment:

No, it takes a lot of time to be able to use a machine properly and safely and for me to be able to give anybody a qualification, an NVQ in the use of an overhand planer in three minutes is just a mockery. (Construction employer)

Two employers felt that the NVQ should be more comprehensive and that the level of skill required to attain the qualification was not in depth enough to prepare the apprentice to work independently.

Course delivery

Colleges have different modes of course delivery, which necessitates apprentices taking different modes of study; either block release or day release. Block release can involve term-time in college with college holidays spent in the workplace. Alternatively, it can mean that apprentices have a cycle of several weeks spent continuously in the workplace followed by several continuous weeks in college. There were mixed opinions on the preferred mode of study, some employers preferred block release as it enabled them to use the apprentices more effectively:

At the moment the Apprenticeship scheme has slightly changed. We take them out for the first year, we do a ten two-week block. We used to do it on day release but we found that this way is better, so they'll be off site for two weeks learning, they'll come back on site, they'll bring back what they've learned, implement it in the working environment for two weeks then go away for two weeks and that's in a ten week block. After that they're on site 37 hours a week. (Construction employer)

Other employers preferred day release because block release meant apprentices were out of the workplace for too long a period:

Block release we would run into problems, that they wouldn't be on the job when we need them and also they get into the swing of college for a month, two months, whatever it would be, and then it takes them a week to get back into the working, so day release is a lot better. (Construction employer)

The Adult Apprenticeship

In fifteen of the companies employers had heard of the Adult Apprenticeship and in seventeen of the companies employers indicated that they would consider engaging adult apprentices.

	Support adult apprenticeship			
	Yes	No	Unsure	Missing response
Construction	12	-	2	0
Engineering	8	1	1	1

Table 3: Would you take on an adult apprentice?

Some employers had already employed older apprentices and although they were not completing the official Apprenticeship programme, they were referred to as apprentices.

We've had something in place called an Improvers Scheme for some time now. It's something we negotiated locally as an employer with our Trade Unions and basically it is an Adult Apprenticeship where people have not done a formal apprenticeship before, they're working for us in a sort of labourer-type capacity or in an area where the skills that they've got is in a reducing market. We would then encourage people to take on the Improvers Scheme. And that would give them the opportunity again to go to college and get an NVQ in whatever trade they have displayed an interest in. (Construction employer)

Employers were asked whether they thought there were any advantages or disadvantages in employing adult apprentices; advantages were seen to be maturity and experience:

The maturity and possibly they've had hands on experience and I think somebody in that age bracket is possibly looking for a bit more security themselves to give us a bit more stability and you know if you take somebody on at twenty-five or up to thirty, you've got a good twenty years. (Engineering employer)

A number of employers did not feel that there would be any disadvantages in employing adult apprentices, the overall opinion was generally positive:

Personally I wouldn't see any, but others may not agree with me. There might be some more fixed in attitude and approach to things. (Engineering employer)

However, when asked to think what the potential disadvantages could be, respondents indicated that adult apprentices are more likely to be 'set in their ways', they may expect a higher wage or cause retention difficulties:

There could be one or two disadvantages and as we get older it becomes more difficult to pick up new things where young people pick it up a lot quicker, particularly with new technology that's coming about. (Engineering employer)

We would prefer a younger person who will soak up knowledge. We like to mould them into the company way. If apprentices are older they may just cream off what they need and leave. (Construction employer)

Retention of apprentices

In South Yorkshire 'retention is well above average in the construction sector (66%) with retention performance amongst carpenters and joiners (74%) particularly high. Retention is also relatively stronger in the Engineering category (59%)' (CI, 2003)

However, nationally Fuller & Unwin (2003) report that there are only four sectors in which there is a completion rate greater than 40% for the Advanced Apprenticeship framework. Of these, engineering manufacture, electrical installation/electro-technical industry; and the motor industry are included. In 2003 there was only a 19% completion rate in South Yorkshire across all Apprenticeship programmes (CI, 2003).

Reasons for leaving the apprenticeship before completion of the advanced framework were reported as; finding new jobs with better pay and prospects; workload made it difficult to study for qualifications; some were dismissed or made redundant and others had personal problems (Fuller & Unwin, 2003:106). Although the retention rate after completing the Apprenticeship at both levels two and three were good in the companies involved in this research, some employers did indicate that apprentices were more likely to leave before they had completed the framework, if they left at all.

Over the last few years it has been upward of 75%. Last year we had 18 apprentices complete and only one left. The company are looking at

keeping people on for the rest of their working life. The majority of those who arrive as apprentices complete, if they leave it is usually due to some sort of social reason. (Construction employer)

We would tend to lose them during the four years rather than lose them at the end. By the end the weaker ones and the ones that have caused us any difficulty have tended to drop by the wayside for one reason or another. Those that make it to the finishing line, pretty much all of them will stay with us. And the drop-out rate, even up to the end of the four years, isn't particularly high. (Construction employer)

For many of the employers the apprenticeship programme is viewed as a training investment. Therefore, retaining the apprentices once they have completed their apprenticeship is extremely important:

We try and keep them all. The mainstay of our apprenticeship is the three years, although it's an advanced apprenticeship we still see it as – it's a foundation. We train them for three years and then at the end of three years they're an asset to the business. But we still see that they are studying and learning for the next four or five years and we understand that. We don't expect our apprentices just to completely finish and straightaway throw them in at the deep end, that's not right, so we see the three year apprenticeship as a foundation, they will still be learning and we'll still follow them up after that. (Construction employer)

One employer indicated that apprentices are highly valued once they have completed the framework and may decide to go and work elsewhere:

It's a trend in this industry, it's a very high level of technology, they could probably go to most other companies and be able to get a job, so it's probably quite easy for them to walk out and go somewhere else. If they think I don't really want to do this, I'll go somewhere else, that's the only thing, and maybe poaching them if they've heard about them, that's all. I don't really know other than that. (Engineering employer)

Wages

The majority of employers paid apprentices a standard wage, the wage was usually based on a proportion of the wage that the fully qualified employee would earn. Those in the construction industry often based the wage on guidelines set by the CITB. In both cases the wage increased as the apprentices gained more experience. One employer felt that offering a decent wage was crucial for retention. It's basically a standard wage really. Once they start, I keep adding bits - you find the lads that are good, you've got to give them a little bit extra because they are good, you know, and the trouble being is once they start thinking I'm a tradesman, I've learned all my qualifications, even if they've only been here two years, they're wanting to be on quite a high wage and the trouble being is they will leave you and go with someone else and they will go and knock on somebody else's door saying 'I am a plasterer' and they'll want full money straight away so it's a difficult situation. (Construction employer)

Allowing progression to higher education

There were mixed opinions concerning whether the company would allow apprentices to progress to higher education. Although most of the respondents stated that apprentices would be supported to progress to higher education some of the smaller companies were unsure about whether they would allow apprentices to progress.

	Support progression to higher education			
	Yes	No	Unsure	Missing response
Construction	10	1	3	1
Engineering	8	-	1	2

Table 4. Would you suppor	t apprentices to p	progress to highe	r education?
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In some companies higher education was seen to be part of the Apprenticeship. This reflected the Apprenticeship research (Bowers-Brown, 2004) where some of the apprentices stated that they would automatically progress to the Higher National Certificate, as the company considered this part of the Apprenticeship training:

One's now classed as a technician, but he's still doing his HNC so I class him as an apprentice still. He finishes his HNC this year. They start off at the basic with their NVQ and then, if they want, HNC, ONC. They finish at HNC. (Engineering employer)

Other employers did not consider the HNC as part of the required training but nonetheless were extremely positive about higher education and would allow apprentices to progress: We do say to people look, there's going to be the opportunity to do things like HNC if you display a talent in a particular area or there might be the opportunity to go and do supervisory type qualifications if you are wanting to move into that sort of area. (Construction employer)

[The apprentice] is going on and on and on and that's fine, he can go as far as he likes. We've told (the apprentice) we will sponsor him for a degree. (Engineering employer)

The construction companies were as likely as the engineering companies to support progression to higher-level courses (Table 4). However, amongst the smaller companies and particularly in the smaller construction companies, fewer apprentices had sought to progress to higher-level courses. For some employers higher-level skills were seen as self-development for the individual rather than a benefit to the company:

I'm not sure if another stint at college just to get a degree will benefit us as a company. If he went off for two years, things change in two years and I think he'd move on to somewhere else, which is what I did, so there would be no point for him to go on block because I'd lose out, being realistic. We're only a small firm, not a big firm. (Construction employer)

Can apprentices progress to posts in the company which require higherlevel skills?

Respondents identified a variety of jobs that they felt required higher-level skills, these included plumbing, injection moulding, book-keeping, managerial positions, electrician and engineering posts.

Employers were asked whether apprentices were candidates to progress to these posts, seventeen respondents stated that they were and one respondent stated that they were potential candidates. Some employers indicated that people who were currently in posts that required higher-level skills had begun their careers as apprentices:

A couple of our people in our senior management team here used to be apprentices at (this site). We have got people in Houston, people in Aberdeen at different parts of the organisation throughout the world, I think in Singapore as well, they used to be apprentices in (this site), it is a good place to start but they do need to have the ambition and the capability and the academic capability (Engineering employer) We have ex-apprentices now not just moving into the situation of being site supervisors and managers but also moving on to the estimating section, the surveying section and they've all started from craft apprenticeships. (Construction employer)

The employer's assessment about the capability of the apprentice to continue studying, was a key factor that determined whether or not the apprentice would be a candidate for the posts that required higher-level skills:

Apprentices should certainly be more suitable for higher level posts, however it doesn't always work out that way. People who have years of experience are sometimes more valuable. However, those who have been on the apprenticeship can think and generate more ideas in a shorter time scale. (Construction employer)

Depends on the ability of the person and we promote within the ranks those who can do the job. This may just be to NVQ level 3. Profitability is more important than exams if someone can do a job well. There are people on board who have degrees, marketing and construction management. We will offer opportunities if people want to progress. (Construction employer)

One employer stated that there was nowhere for the apprentice to progress within the company if he gained higher-level skills. However he acknowledged that higher-level skills were desirable:

They (an apprentice who had gone on to do an HND) would be absolutely magic. Any employer out there would snatch their hand off, absolutely, they would come out with a really, really good wage. (Construction employer)

Are apprentices expected to progress to higher level courses?

Although the majority of respondents believed that the apprentices would be

good candidates for posts that required higher-level skills, there were few who

stated that there was an expectation that apprentices should progress:

If they are happy to be a joiner or a plumber or a brickie once they've qualified, then that's fine by us. Not everybody can progress to supervisor or manager level. Those that show an inclination to want to move in those particular directions we will try and support them as and when we feel appropriate and when there's money available to do that. It's very much down to what the business wants, where we need people in terms of their skill levels and what those individuals want to do in terms of their future careers and what money's available. (Construction employer) One company ensured that apprentices had training plans and that they could use these to outline their expectations of progressing to higher-level courses:

Everybody has a training plan, we're just finalising this year's. Everybody has a link to the next step up because we're that kind of business and we have to do it. Not every SME, not every small company will evolve into a main contractor; they're very few and far between, so that leads you an opportunity by chance of how you get from where you are now to where you could be in the future. (Construction employer)

Some respondents expected apprentices to attend further training courses,

however, these courses were unlikely to be at higher-levels, but were seen to

be crucial to the company:

From the company's point of view, yes, we give them, we tend to move into other areas of training for them when they first come out of apprentice so we go through First Aid training and things like that. All my employees without exception are all qualified first aiders, so we tend to go into a lot of Health and Safety, Health and Safety Management qualifications first. Only long term then would we look at things like design, computer aided drafting and business studies which prepares them more then for contract management. (Construction employer)

Progression support

Respondents were asked about the methods of support they offer or would offer to employees who had completed their Apprenticeship and sought to progress to higher levels of study. The support ranged from time off work to attend classes, payment of tuition fees and the use of company resources to facilitate learning. The most common types of support were time off for the course and payment of tuition fees; however, some companies stated that they 'couldn't run to both'. Some companies had not been in the situation of supporting an apprentice through higher education and so the responses were purely speculative. Others understood the importance of offering support and mentoring to staff as they were identified as the company's greatest asset:

It depends what the requirement was I suppose; until we have somebody that, you know, wants to go that way then I don't know what support would be required. (Construction employer)

If they are then wanting to do further things you've still got to be there for them because it's been a partnership relationship and I think what a lot of people don't realise is, is that the best investment a company have got is their staff. (Engineering employer)

Barriers to progression

Employers were asked whether they thought there were any barriers for the company, in allowing apprentices to progress to higher education. The majority of employers were able to identify barriers or potential barriers, including some of the employers who were very supportive of their apprentices progressing to higher education. Two of the barriers identified were the choice of study programme and whether the qualification was relevant or required by the company:

The only barrier would be if the qualification was not related to the job. It has to be worthwhile for (company name). If (company name) feels the qualification is relevant the apprentice will be given every backing. (Construction employer)

There are, but they are just the normal things like the ability of the apprentice, what the organisation needs in terms of skills at that particular time, financial constraints in terms of how much money we've got available to train people, work initiatives i.e. can we afford for so many people to be away at college during the same year. (Construction employer)

The issue of the higher-level qualification not being required was a particularly problematic barrier; if the apprentice wanted to progress, the options would be far slimmer than for an apprentice who had employer support. Lack of support may result in the apprentice leaving the firm to find a job where progression to higher-levels of study would be supported. Yet there was also a concern that employees would leave regardless, once they had attained higher-level qualifications. Five employers stated that if there wasn't a requirement for higher-level skills or the positions weren't vacant for those jobs which did require higher-level skills, the apprentice would not be allowed to progress. Respondents stated that there was still a need for less qualified people to do the lower level jobs and therefore that would prevent them from allowing apprentices to progress further:

Well there'd be a cost implication no doubt, wouldn't there? It depends where they wanted to trigger and what it was going to pay them because there's only a certain need for the high qualification in a company like ours, we're only a small company and we only do certain types of work so if it really wasn't needed in the job we would ask the question why do you want to and if they say in the end I feel it's possible for me to better myself and they end up leaving us anyway because we couldn't give them what they wanted. (Engineering employer)

One of the most frequently mentioned barriers to allowing apprentices to progress was the cost or financial implications. Time restraints were also an issue, particularly because once the apprentices have completed the framework they are expected to contribute fully to the workforce. The time off for study would be problematic for some companies:

To a degree I suppose there are, purely because we do have a workload that we're working on everyday and the more time you spend out of work the less work gets done. (Construction employer)

Sometimes reality can kick in, where if a person is in a very, very busy role and the demands upon them are very high, the manager might defer their education, say if they're over 25, like defer it until time pressures are less. I've known that happen on a couple of occasions, i.e. they weren't willing to release the person. (Engineering employer)

The research conducted with apprentices (Bowers-Brown, 2004) showed that some apprentices would not pursue higher education on completion of the apprenticeship, as they felt they could earn more in the non-managerial roles or roles that they felt did not require higher education. One employer echoed this opinion, indicating that a perceived lack of monetary gain was a barrier that stopped apprentices pursuing higher-level courses:

They tend not to want to [apprentices progress to higher education] because the financial reward as an electrician compared to the financial reward of, say, a contracts manager, the difference is not significant for the added work that they get that they need to put in. (Construction employer)

Higher Level Qualifications

Although employers were not asked specifically about the higher education qualifications of which they were most aware, they most frequently referred to the HNC/HND followed by an honours degree or Foundation degree. Those that mentioned the Foundation degree were extremely enthusiastic about it:

I've actually sat in with [college name] on their committee for the foundation degree. I'll probably look at that as a base level for our managers. (Construction employer)

What we're trying to do here, and it's going on as we speak, is develop a foundation degree. They want to make it more attractive for mum and dad and young Willie for entry into this lot if we said, 'Okay, rather than stay on at school and do A Levels come and join our practices at 16. We'll put you on a vocational route leading to a foundation degree. You can do NVQs at Level 2, Level 3. You'll go to college and do BTEC or something and then you'll progress forward and do foundation degree and beyond if you wish. Now that's attractive. (Construction employer)

Although many respondents did not mention the Foundation degree it would appear that this qualification would meet the higher-level skills that many of them stated they required. As some of the respondents indicated, it is higherlevel technical and practical skills coupled with problem solving skills rather than purely academic theory that they require, the Foundation degree would appear to meet these needs precisely.

Conclusions

Overall there is little difference in responses by sector the exception to this is in the very small construction companies where progression to higher education is less likely to be supported.

The Apprenticeship is a highly valued set of skills and qualifications that the majority of respondents felt was an excellent method of recruiting new staff. However, the interviews indicate that there is a general feeling of concern about the quantity and quality of candidates that are applying for the Apprenticeship placements. Although the respondents were generally pleased with the progress the apprentices made once they were in the workplace, they were often disappointed with the candidates who had applied for positions or the selection of candidates presented to them by the college. Respondents felt that there had been a decline in the standard of candidates that they interviewed. Much of this concern stemmed from the belief that vocational options are not given enough value in schools. Information and guidance is seen to be biased towards academic routes to higher education rather than having parity with vocational post-compulsory education.

The Adult Apprenticeship was welcomed by the majority (17) of employers, who said that they would be happy to employ apprentices who were slightly older. Respondents felt that slightly older apprentices would be more mature and take a greater level of responsibility. Few respondents were able to identify disadvantages in employing adult apprentices, those that did felt that they may be more likely than younger apprentices to request a higher salary.

Overall, relationships with the colleges were mixed, with employers taking different levels of responsibility for their involvement. Some employers are actively involved with the colleges and have a positive relationship, whereas others have attempted to engage with their college partner but with limited success. Respondents indicated that they felt it was useful to have a named link-person at the college who updates them on apprentices' progress. Some respondents had very good relationships with their college link-person. The relationship enabled clearer communication about the apprentice's progress; this was enhanced when staff turnover at the college remained low as consistency was valued by the employers.

College open-days were events that employers valued and would like to receive more opportunities to attend; however, there was an acknowledgement that it was often difficult to attend due to commitments at work.

Encouraging college lecturers to take placements in industry was suggested by several employers as a link that would be useful both to the company and the lecturers. It was felt that this would enable the lecturers to gain an insight into the latest technological developments as well as updating their skills and practical knowledge. The apprentices would also benefit as the lecturers would become more aware of the requirements of industry.

For some employers the apprentices' learning at college closely reflected the needs of the business and fitted in well with the practical work they were doing in the workplace. Others felt that the theoretical elements could be taught in greater depth. The Apprenticeship curriculum generally meets the needs of the employers, although there was some acceptance that the college could not

include everything that the industry required due to the bespoke nature of some production processes.

It would appear that the work of the COVEs will be the most appropriate method of enhancing employer engagement as well as encouraging college lecturers to become more involved in industry.

There was no overall preference to the mode of study apprentices took, some respondents preferred their apprentices to study on block release whereas others felt that they needed contact on a weekly basis and therefore preferred apprentices to study on day release.

Many of the employers were willing to allow apprentices to progress to higher education, even to the extent that for some this was a requirement on recruitment to the Apprenticeship. However, other employers did not require a workforce qualified to higher levels and therefore would not facilitate access to higher education.

As with the apprentice research (Bowers-Brown, 2004); finance, time and the ability of the apprentice were identified as the barriers for employers in allowing apprentices to progress. There was a concern amongst some employers that employees who had progressed from an Apprenticeship to higher-level courses would leave the company once they were better qualified. However, other employers realised that they needed to allow apprentices to progress to higher education to meet the skills needs of the company and also to retain the apprentice. The need to offer higher education to attract candidates for the Apprenticeship was suggested by one employer. This suggestion may be one way to resolve the perceived issue of the bias towards academic post-compulsory education courses in careers information, advice and guidance in schools.

Respondents at many of the companies indicated that further training is integral, this is usually in health and safety procedures or bespoke company training; however the training is not always credit bearing. It would be of benefit

to all employees to ensure that additional training has accreditation attached so that a portfolio of qualifications can be achieved and potentially contribute to access to higher education.

Not all employers were aware of the different progression opportunities available to apprentices. Building Pathways has produced a CD-ROM which demonstrates the different pathways apprentices can take to higher education and the options they have at a higher-level. As some respondents were unclear about the differences in the higher level courses it would be useful for all employers who engage apprentices to receive information guides to explain the differences between the programmes.

This research shows that for those students who wish to progress to higher education via the Apprenticeship route there are employers who will support this. It would be helpful if employers advertised their support for progression to higher education when recruiting so that candidates can make informed choices about their future study and career plans.

Recommendations

Information about Apprenticeships should be provided to all students through Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) at school. This guidance should be universal including those in the highest achieving groups and should be presented on an equal basis to information about traditional academic opportunities. It is important that the opportunities to progress to higher education from the Apprenticeship route are emphasised at this stage.

The Apprenticeship progression pathways should be made available to school students. Having access to this information will allow students who are thinking of taking an Apprenticeship to enquire about employer support for progression to higher education at the interview stage.

After apprentices complete the framework they are often expected to undertake further bespoke training and courses in the workplace. Employers should be encouraged to ensure that these courses and training are accredited. Accreditation will contribute to an employee's qualification portfolio and enable employees to negotiate entry to higher level courses.

Within each sector companies should be encouraged to promote and support lifelong learning amongst their employees.

The Foundation Degree Forward campaign to promote employer engagement should be continued to ensure that employers are more aware of all the higher education options that are available to meet their skills needs.

Enthusiasm for Adult Apprenticeships exists and the LSC should continue its campaign to encourage this programme.

Higher education providers need to work more closely with employers to raise awareness of existing higher education provision and to create appropriate communication forums for curriculum development.

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