



The Decision to Undertake an Apprenticeship A Case Study

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Briefing Note 002

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Executive Summary

This briefing note discusses the results of a questionnaire distributed to all incoming apprentices at the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) at the University of Sheffield in September 2015, and responded to by 61 apprentices (response rate of around 50%). These respondents were young, mostly aged 16-18, well-qualified, almost all having 5 or more good GCSEs including English and Maths, and half having at least one parent in a professional or managerial occupation. The data from this questionnaire were used to answer the question ‘what factors influence the decision of young people to undertake an apprenticeship?’

The results show that the desire to undertake an apprenticeship was not developed strongly at the apprentices’ former schools. The majority (54%) reported that they received neither encouragement nor discouragement to undertake an apprenticeship from their school, while a similar proportion (22-23% each) were either encouraged or actively discouraged from following such a course. Those with better school qualifications seem to be particularly likely to have been actively discouraged.

In contrast to attitudes from school, the apprentices report much higher levels of encouragement from their family. A majority (73%) report that they were encouraged to do an apprenticeship, with virtually no-one reporting being discouraged. This is the case whether the apprentice has parents in professional/managerial occupations or not. In addition, approaching half of the apprentices knew a family member who had been an apprentice, while a large majority had a friend who was doing or had done an apprenticeship (far more than who knew someone who had gone to university). Very few of the AMRC apprentices did not have personal acquaintance with apprentices through either friends or families. Such legacy effects therefore seem to have a strong effect on the decision to participate in apprenticeships.

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1. Introduction

This briefing note provides information on the factors that influence the decision to undertake an apprenticeship, based on survey responses given by apprentices engaged in training at the University of Sheffield's Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC). The AMRC was established in 2001 as a partnership between the university and its industrial partner, Boeing, to undertake engineering research focussing on machining and materials for high-value manufacturing sectors. Since its creation, the centre has expanded and added many new partners, including for example Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems and Airbus.

The AMRC began accepting apprentices in 2013, with an initial cohort of 150 apprentices enrolling. As with all apprentices, they are employed, and funded by their employer. The learning aim for the majority of the apprentices is an Advanced Apprenticeship (level 3) obtained after three years, with the possibility of progression to Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships. The first year is based at the AMRC training centre, while years 2 and 3 are spent with the employer, still learning and developing skills.

In January-March 2016, all apprentices in the first year of their programme at the AMRC were asked to complete a short questionnaire asking for information about themselves and their apprenticeship. This briefing note provides some descriptive information obtained from the responses to the questionnaire that were received. In particular, it examines the apprentices' influences and motivation for undertaking an apprenticeship.

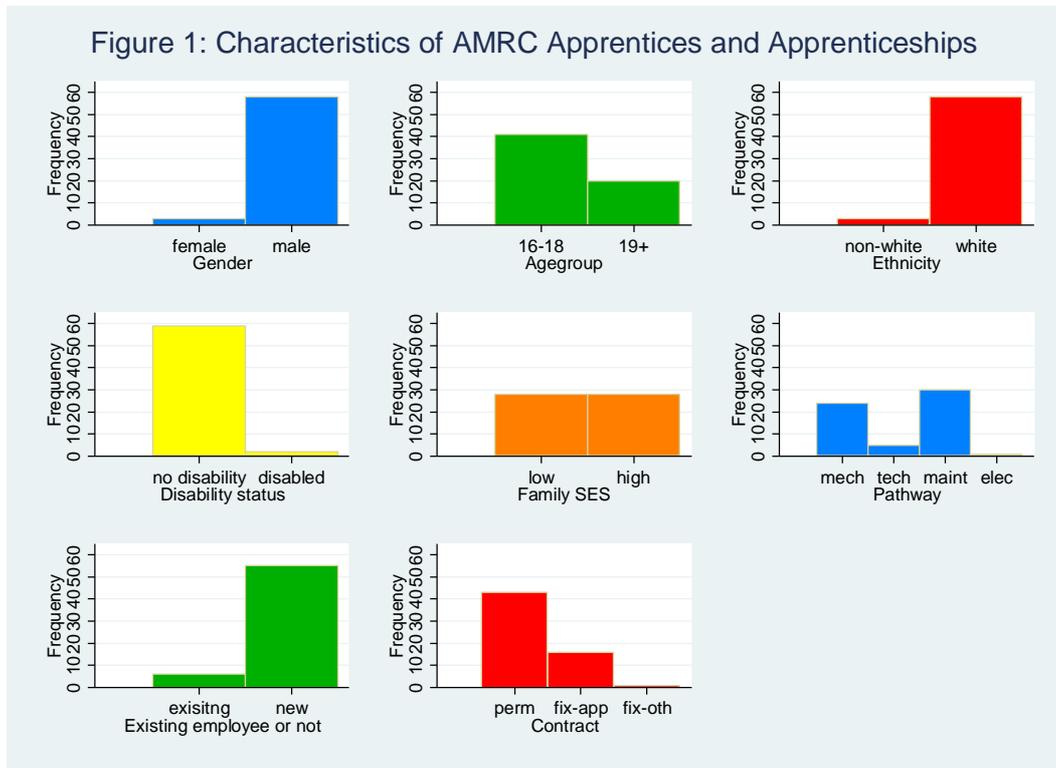
2. Survey data

The survey questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of January 2016 to the full 2015-entry cohort of apprentices at the AMRC (around 120 apprentices) and returned by about half.

To provide some context, Figure 1 illustrates some of the key characteristics of the respondents and their apprenticeships. The figure makes clear that on the whole the apprentices are a homogenous group; almost all are male, white and non-disabled. The only two characteristics listed that show some variation are age group, with two-thirds (41) aged 16-18, and one-third (20) aged 19+, and family socio-economic status. The latter variable was defined as high or low, with high indicating a respondent with at least one parent in a professional or managerial occupation (SOC2010 codes 1-3), and low indicating otherwise. This variable cuts the sample exactly in half, with 28 apprentices in each group (and 5 not knowing the occupation of their parents). The age and family background characteristics will therefore be used to disaggregate some of the results in the following discussion.

Turning to characteristics of the apprenticeships themselves, the most popular area was Maintenance, followed by Mechanical Manufacturing. Almost all of the apprentices were new to their employer at the start of their apprenticeship; very few already worked for their employer before the start of their apprenticeship. This lack of prior-employment with the training firm is in contrast to the national picture, where two-thirds (68%) of apprentices

surveyed in 2014 were ‘internal recruits’ (i.e. had worked for their employer before starting their Apprenticeship). This difference is partly due to the relatively young age of the AMRC apprentices, though even when the national statistics are restricted to the 16-18 year old group, 36% were still already working for their employer before their Apprenticeship started.¹ In terms of contract, the majority had a permanent contract and so the promise of continuing job after the completion of their apprenticeship.



In addition to the characteristics illustrated above, further survey questions revealed almost all (85%) of the apprenticeships were of 3 years duration, with the shortest reported to be 2.5 years. The average number of hours per week spent in learning on site at the AMRC was reported to be 37.3 hours, with a narrow range from 32 to 40. Very few hours of off-site learning were reported, with most apprentices reporting none.

3. Findings

3.1 Prior Qualifications

The questionnaire asked about respondents’ prior qualifications, before starting their Apprenticeship. The apprentices were asked to report all qualifications that they hold, with their responses reported in Table 1 below. It is apparent that this was a well-qualified group of apprentices. 10 of the apprentices (16%) already held A levels, almost all of whom had at least 2 A levels and thus were already sufficiently well qualified to enter Higher Education. At GCSE level, almost all reported holding at least one GCSE at grade C or above, with most

¹ Source for national statistics: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013). *Apprenticeship Evaluation: Learners*. BIS Research Paper Number 124.

holding a wide range (the average number of good GCSEs held being 8). Further questions asked specifically about English and Maths GCSEs, but again these were almost universally held. On the vocational side, few qualifications were held in large numbers, with the exception of BTEC qualifications, held by almost half of the sample.

Table 1: Qualifications Held Before Commencing Apprenticeship

Qualification	Percentage Holding that Qualification
A levels	16
AS Levels	20
GCSEs grades A*-C	98
GCSEs below grade C	41
NVQ3	3
NVQ2	5
BTEC	48
City and Guilds Level 2	2

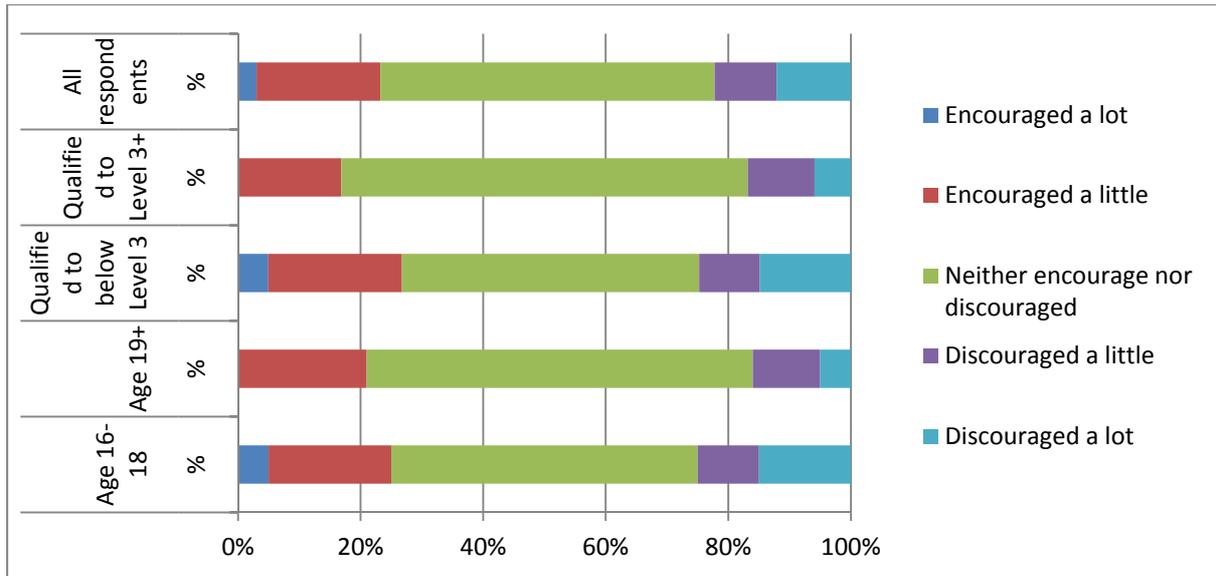
Overall, 18 apprentices (30%) were already qualified to Level 3, via A levels, NVQ Level 3 or BTEC qualifications. It is therefore clear that this was, in general, a well-qualified group even before starting their apprenticeship. This shows that prestigious apprenticeships attract young people who have previously been successful in their education, and would have alternative education options. Such apprenticeships are therefore not being taken as a ‘second chance’ by drop-outs from academic education. What factors, then, led them to choose to do an apprenticeship, instead of the other options they had?

3.2 Influences on Undertaking an Apprenticeship

One possible source of encouragement to undertake an apprenticeship is young people’s school, through discussions with teachers and careers advisers. Figure 2 shows the level of encouragement that the apprentices reported receiving from their school to undertake an apprenticeship. Around a quarter of apprentices were encouraged to do an apprenticeship, while a similar proportion were actively discouraged. The majority received neither encouragement nor discouragement, but either received no guidance at all, or received no guidance about apprenticeships in particular.

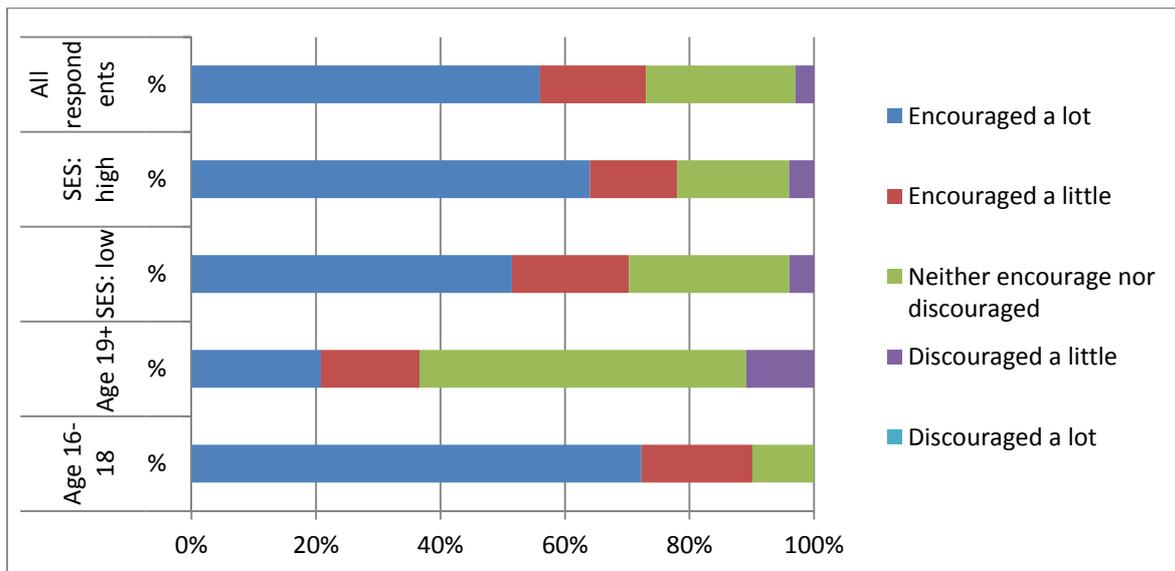
When disaggregated by prior qualification level, those less well educated (currently at or below Level 2) received more encouragement and also more discouragement, on average, to do an apprenticeship. There are probably two effects here, with the best amongst the lower qualified group being encouraged and considered as ideal candidates for an apprenticeship, while the lower ability amongst this group are actively discouraged from doing an apprenticeship. Members of the better qualified group (Level 3 or above) were less likely to discuss apprenticeships at school, with a much larger proportion receiving neither encouragement nor discouragement. By age group, the younger group (aged 16-18) received both more encouragement to do an apprenticeship and more discouragement. They are less likely to have not discussed apprenticeships at all, than members of the older cohort aged 19+.

Figure 2: Encouragement from School for Doing an Apprenticeship



It is when we turn to consider the family, that we see apprentices receiving much more encouragement (see Figure 3). Over half of the apprentices (56%) were encouraged a lot by their parents to do an apprenticeship, with a further 17% encouraged a little. Only 3% (2 respondents) were actively discouraged by their parents. Splitting the sample again by two characteristics of interest, there are large differences in parental encouragement by age group. The younger age group seem to be much more likely to be encouraged to do an apprenticeship by their parents, with 90% being encouraged, 73% encouraged a lot, and none discouraged at all. For those aged 19+, the parents seem much more likely to leave them to make their own decisions, with just over a half neither encouraged nor discouraged.

Figure 3: Encouragement from Parents for Doing an Apprenticeship



There is no real difference in encouragement to do an apprenticeship across the two parental background groups. Indeed, if anything, those apprentices with at least one parent in a professional/managerial occupation were slightly more likely to be encouraged to do an

apprenticeship than those apprentices with neither parent in such a senior occupation (78% versus 70%). Amongst this, admittedly very small, sample at least, there appears to be no lack of support for apprenticeship amongst parents from higher social backgrounds, though of course we have a selected sample here of young people who actually did an apprenticeship, and we do not have any information on those who did not do an apprenticeship because they were discouraged.

Another factor that can influence the decision to participate in apprenticeships is whether young people know others who are also or have previously undertaken similar learning. The apprentices were asked to report what their three best friends from school are now doing. Half had at least one other apprentice amongst their three best friends from school, with 13% reporting two of their three best friends were now apprentices. By way of contrast, 82% of the respondents had no university students amongst their three best friends, 11% had one, and 3% each had two or all three of their best friends going to university. Given the respective overall numbers doing a degree and an apprenticeship, it is clear that fellow apprentices are over-represented amongst our respondent apprentices' closest friendship groups.

Considering now whether the respondents knew of *any* friend or family member who was doing or had done an apprenticeship, the results are reported in Table 2, for all apprentices and split by parental family background. It is clear from the results that only a small minority of the AMRC apprentices do not know any family and friend who had undertaken an apprenticeship. This is also true when we split the sample by parental occupation. This suggests the importance of peer groups in the decision to do an apprenticeship, perhaps due to acting as a role model, or more simply as a source of information.

Table 2: Familiarity with Other Apprentices: Proportion with a Friend or Family Member who has Undertaken an Apprenticeship

	All	SES: low	SES: high
	%	%	%
Has friend who has done an apprenticeship	77	82	75
Has family member who has done an apprenticeship	43	43	50
Knows no-one who has done an apprenticeship	12	7	11

To investigate the information angle further, we asked the apprentices to report their sources of information about apprenticeships, before they started their learning programme. The results, in Table 3 below, reveal that friends and family were indeed the most consulted, with the exception of the discussions with the AMRC themselves, presumably by which point the respondents had already decided that they wanted to do an apprenticeship. Other sources of information, such as schools and careers advisors, were not consulted nearly as often. This again shows the importance of peer effects and personal information for the decision to do an apprenticeship. When split by prior qualification level, the more highly qualified seem to be more willing to do their own research by consulting the Apprenticeship Website, while relying less on information from friends and family.

Table 3: Sources of Information about Apprenticeships

	All	Qualified to below Level 3	Qualified to Level 3+
	%	%	%
The Apprenticeship Website	39	33	56
Current/previous employer	10	12	6
School or college previously attended	31	33	28
The AMRC	56	56	56
Careers Advisor, Next Steps, Connexions	13	14	11
Jobcentre Plus	2	0	6
Friends and family	54	58	44
Internet	7	7	6
None of these	5	5	6

4. Conclusion

This short briefing note has looked at the influences behind the decision to undertake an apprenticeship amongst a group of apprentices in the first year of an Apprenticeship based in a training centre at a Higher Education Institution (the University of Sheffield). These apprentices are well qualified, with most having a large number of GCSEs, including English and Maths, and a significant minority also holding academic Level 3 qualifications that could potentially qualify them for a place on an undergraduate degree. On the basis of such prior qualifications, most of the surveyed apprentices will have had a range of options open to them, and so actively chose to do an apprenticeship rather than another of these options.

Looking at the influences on that choice, it is clear that, from the observed sample at least, apprentices overwhelmingly rely upon the advice and encouragement of their family rather than their school, with the latter playing very little role in the decision to undertake an apprenticeship. Friends and family are the main information source used when making this decision, and hence apprentices are far more likely than average to know someone who is doing or has done an apprenticeship.

Thus in order to increase engagement by young people with apprenticeships, more information and encouragement needs to be provided in schools, explaining the costs and benefits of apprenticeships relative to alternative routes, to allow young people to make informed choices. This would reduce the reliance on information gathered through informal personal acquaintance channels, and so widen the spread of apprenticeships beyond peer groups of individuals who know other apprentices. Of course, to the extent that such informal information networks remain important, then as the Apprenticeship system expands in the country, more people are going to know someone who is doing or has done one, further raising awareness and enthusiasm amongst potential new apprentices.

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