

Apprenticeships: Are we working?

**National Society of Apprentices
Covid-19, Lockdown and Recovery
research key findings**

Welcome from Leadership team

Once again everybody is talking about apprenticeships without talking to apprentices. If you are the kind of person that reads reports about apprenticeships, the economy or in fact any kind of report that doesn't involve a sports team and a final score this is unlikely to be the first time you've read about the impact of Covid-19 on apprenticeships. The chances are that this is going to be the first report you've read that is by apprentices though.

The National Society of Apprentices speaks to and for apprentices at a local, national and European level. Supporting apprentices to reflect on their apprenticeships and engage with decision makers on the issues that affect them. Our membership is open to apprentices regardless of what industry they work in, where they live or the level of their apprenticeship. The society is funded by the Apprentice Extra card. A society for apprentices, run by apprentices and paid for by apprentices.

Like lots of life today our work has moved online. We continue to speak to apprentices and ask what they think about the decisions being made about them. In May and June we launched a survey and over 1000 apprentices responded. We asked apprentices about:

- Their experience of working during lockdown
- How the crisis had impacted their education
- Their physical wellbeing and mental health
- The quality of information and support they were receiving from their work and training provider

At the start of lockdown we were concerned that apprentices were being furloughed on just 80% of the apprentice minimum wage, now £4.15. That would have meant some apprentices trying to get by on just £3.31 an hour. Apprentices have said in the survey that this is happening but that it is unusual. Pages and pages of reports have been written about poverty and apprentices and it is disappointing to see that a few employers are still willing to do the absolute bare minimum to support their apprentices.

We'd like to thank our partner employers, trade unions, colleges, universities and training providers for supporting their apprentices to participate in the society and promoting this research. Most of all, thank you to the apprentices that took part in the survey.

We are the leadership team of the National Society of Apprentices. We hope you will take our contribution seriously and thank you for taking the time to read our report.

The Leadership team of the National Society of Apprentices



Findings

"Ensuring all apprentices have the stuff they need, to effectively continue their apprenticeship ... my provider just wants the work done, that's all."

Childcare Apprentice from London

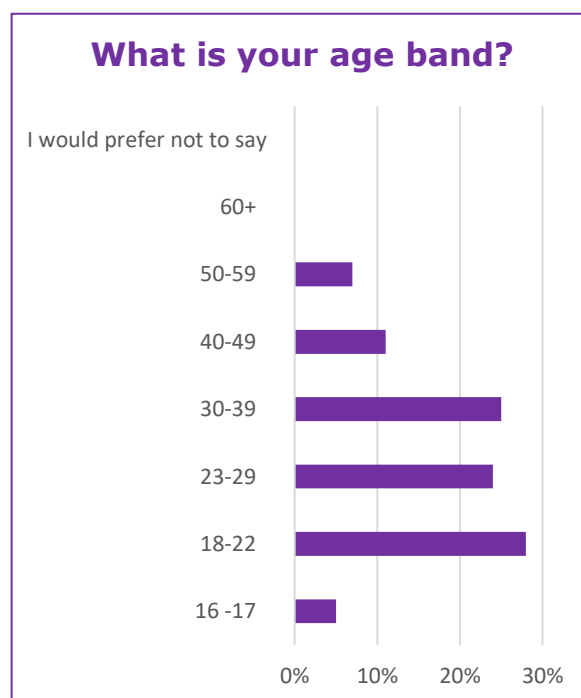
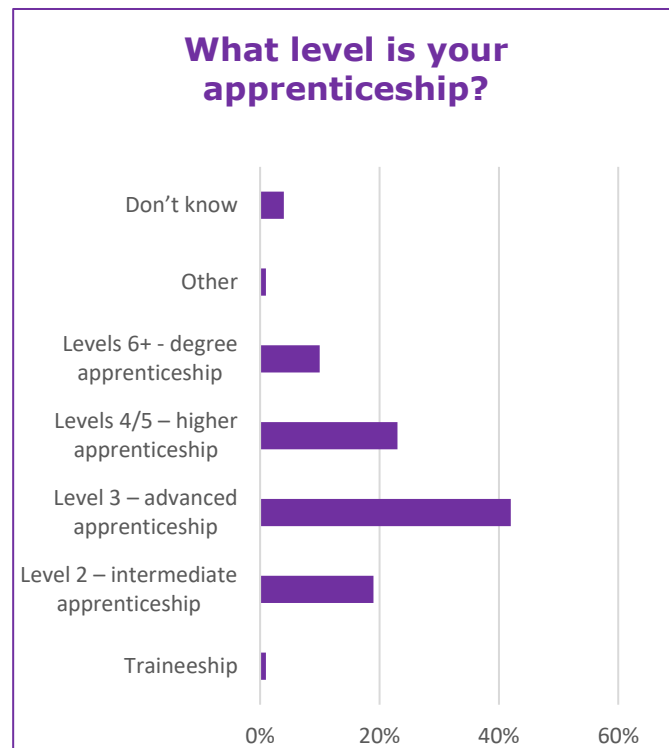
Apprentice experience of Lockdown

Who took part?

Our survey was open for 4 weeks over May and June 2020. 1063 apprentices completed the survey. We promoted the survey to apprentice extra card holders, through social media and supporting organisations promoted the survey to their apprentices.



Modern and Graduate apprenticeships in Scotland use a different numbering scheme. In our survey we asked apprentices in Scotland about their apprenticeships in the language they use to describe their apprenticeships. This table includes their responses too.



Learning and work

Our survey found that two thirds (68%) of apprentices are still working in their normal jobs. This group of apprentices were mostly working from home. At the time of our survey a quarter of apprentices we spoke to had been furloughed (25%). The remaining apprentices had either been made redundant or were at home expecting to return to work soon.

The responses we received make it clear that the wage guarantee brought in by the Treasury has been a success with over 99% of apprentices saying that they are receiving at least 80% of their normal wages. Looking at the responses from the survey we are reminded that every apprentice kept in work is a success

At NSoA we often compare the experience of apprentices in the UK with what happens to apprentices we know in other countries. It was apparent in our discussions with the European Apprentice Network that the UK system was comprehensive, simple and relatively generous.

The apprentices still physically at work came from a range of apprenticeships. Essential apprentice workers come in all shapes and sizes, from the obvious care workers and manufacturing engineers to agricultural workers and administrators.

Apprentices have told us that learning has changed. It will come as no surprise that 33% have had their training moved online, and that for 16% training has stopped.

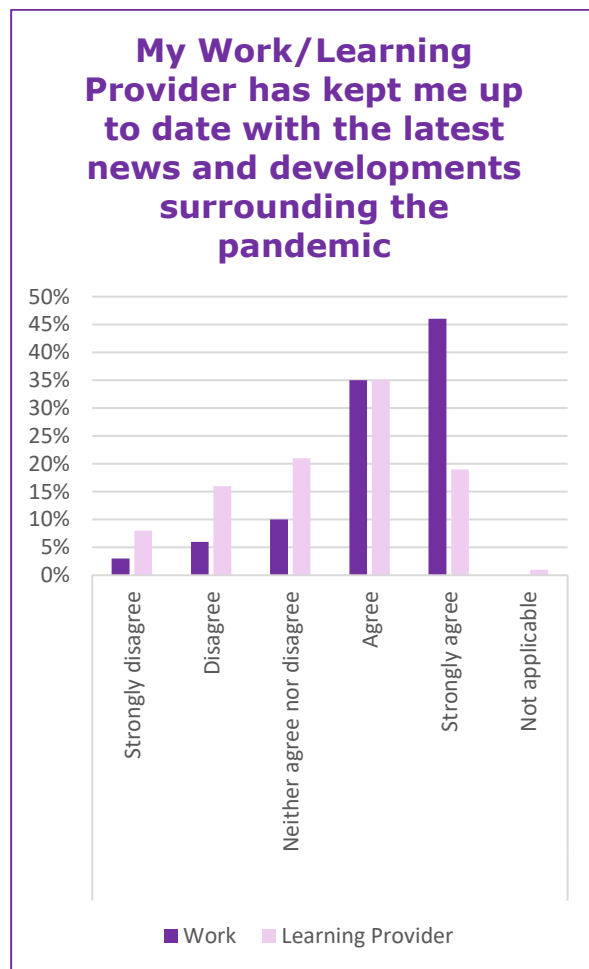
Of the apprentices furloughed or working from home 17% talk about doing less learning and 27% say they have received less contact from their training provider. We know it is often a struggle to balance the demands of work and training. After years of apprentices saying they do not receive their off the job training apprentices are reporting doing even less training whilst working from home or on furlough. This is a missed opportunity for training providers.

Apprentices also spoke to us about the importance of communication:

“My teacher has phoned me weekly to help me and monitor my progress. This has been really helpful and feels like I am cared for and supported”

Level 2 Logistics Apprentice from Northern Ireland

Amongst the respondents to our survey apprentices broadly feel that employers have been communicating the situation well but have been disappointed in the communication from their training providers.



Wellbeing and mental health crisis

Lockdown has exacerbated what was already a growing mental health crisis amongst young people. We have consistently promoted the Apprentice Mental Health Support service to our members. It has been an invaluable support to apprentices across the country. It is clear to us from the volume of responses from apprentices that this support is no longer enough.

Half of apprentices say "I am concerned about my mental wellbeing"

The apprentices we surveyed speak best for themselves:

"Due to my job loss I am a little bit stressed as I have a short amount of time to find another vacancy before my digital marketing apprenticeship can no longer continue."

Level 3 Sales Apprentice from London

"This is a very insular and lonely time, with lots of uncertainty weighing on people's minds creating anxiety."

Level 4 Legal Apprentice from London

"No contact with friends and family is difficult"

Level 3 Engineering Apprentice from the South East

"I am working from home with 2 kids. You do the math...."

Level 4 Business Apprentice from Yorkshire

"I am anxious about returning to work, even with PPE I worry that I could still be at risk of contracting COVID-19. I also worry that there are negative effects of being at home during lockdown whilst being furloughed."

Level 3 Sales Apprentice from the South East

"I have autism which means I tend to struggle immensely when there is a lack of routine in my life and this increases the amount of anxiety and panic attacks I already face on a daily basis."

Level 3 Creative and Design Apprentice from South East

"I suffer with depression and anxiety already. The increased worry with regards to COVID-19 I'm still attending work, however, I'm struggling to cope with the limited contact I'm having with people on a daily basis."

Level 3 apprentice from the East Midlands

"Even though I understand that the situation we are in now is temporary, thinking about how the pandemic will affect our economy and how we move forward in the future is quite nerve wrecking. As a result, my levels of stress, anxiety, low mood have increased significantly."

Level 3 Digital Apprentice from London

"Having to go into work to hit the same targets like nothing is happening is worrying"

Apprentice from Scotland

"It is more stressful to do my college work as remote learning doesn't compare to face to face teaching in the class room"

Level 2 Logistics Apprentice Northern Ireland

Apprentices also had some suggestions of what employers and providers could do to help:

"Reassurance - we are not expected to fulfil the same criteria/hit the same targets and acknowledgement that life shouldn't be the same."

Level 3 Business Admin apprentice from the South West

"frequent online sessions in an open forum to discuss anything and everything so long as it isn't work or virus related. the type of nonsense discussions that you would have in a break room - good for morale and wellbeing - I actually initiated this in my work place."

Level 4 apprentice Yorkshire and Humber

Equipment and space

Learning from home was already a reality for many apprentices. Rather than the day release apprentices we see on tv when an MP visits a factory or college most apprentices are at work full time. Most of us are at work fulltime with assessors coming to visit us in the workplace once every 4 to 6 weeks. Our learning takes place at our desks or at home, if at all.

A fifth (21%) of apprentices told us that they don't have the equipment they need to work or learn from home. In addition to this only a quarter (27%) of apprentices say that they have access to a quiet place at home to work from for 7+ hours a day.

Half (53%) of apprentices reported that they had access to a quiet place to work from at home for less than 2 hours a day

One of the impacts of everyone being at home has been to make the divide between apprentices who have the space and equipment to learn and those that don't even worse. As we read through the Resolution Foundation report "Lockdown Living" we recognised what they could see; that lockdown had had a bigger impact on younger workers like us. We have less living space and are already on a low wage.

We asked apprentices about what support they had received whilst working and learning during lockdown:

"I've been offered computers, chairs and other equipment if needed. Have been assured it is fine to work from home until it is genuinely safe to return to work."

Higher level Apprentice from North West.

"Relaxation skills on skype, phone meeting every morning with the team and a mental awareness support worker if you need a chat. Also flexible working due to my children being at home from school closure."

Level 2 Business Apprentice from the South East

These are just a couple of examples of the support apprentices have received.

Apprentices were happy to tell us about employers, colleges and training providers that made sure they had the equipment they needed to carry on learning.

Unfortunately, not every apprentice has had such a supportive employer. It is clear that not everyone has been able to carry on learning and working.

We also can't assume that every apprentice has the space at home to learn. More must be done to challenge any assumption that everyone has the right environment to learn in at home

It is worth noting that regions/nations where there are higher levels of average private rent costs also are the places where apprentices report that they don't have enough quiet space or equipment to do their work or learning properly.



What is to be done?

"we need an opportunity for social contact with colleagues that is not just about work. Also time to actually do my apprenticeship work.

Myself and the other apprentices have had real trouble getting our 20% off the job time. I have never managed to get the whole 20% and some weeks haven't been allowed any.

If I book any time to my apprenticeship then I'm given more work as that shows I have capacity. I am concerned that funding will be withdrawn and I will be blamed."

Apprentice from West Midlands

Keeping apprenticeships going

Recommendations

At NSoA we see that work will be very different over the next couple of years. We have read about the impact prolonged unemployment has on young peoples wellbeing and future work chances. It is important to keep as many people in work and education as possible. Organisations such as the CBI and the Learning and Work Institute have suggested ways government can support apprentices and businesses. These are our proposals.

Time for Day Release

We think it's time for apprentices under the age of 25 to return to a day release model of training. The government should pay the wages of apprentices on day or block release.

All of the apprenticeship pay surveys talk about apprentices not receiving their off the job training. Apprentices regularly speak to us about the difficulty of getting time to learn from their employers. By returning to day or block release we can make sure that apprentices get a quality education. Now is not the time to relax the rules about off the job training. If apprentices, parents, and the government are to trust the apprenticeship programme it must deliver both real work and a real education.

The Dual training system used in German speaking countries and the Australian Apprenticeship system already have wage subsidy elements and the New Zealand Support Programme, announced last week, includes substantial wage subsidy for under 25's. We agree that it is time for the same support for apprentices in the UK.

This would reduce the cost burden of apprenticeships on employers as well as guarantee the quality of education on offer to apprentices. Politicians are planning to end "blended learning" as soon as possible for school and college learners because it isn't as good as face to face education. We should no longer accept it is good enough for young apprentices.

Longer Apprenticeships for under 25s

Apprenticeships across the UK tend to be shorter than those in Europe, New Zealand and Australia. We propose that apprenticeships be extended in duration to at least 2-3 years. By extending apprenticeships we can safeguard apprentices from qualifying and looking for a job when there are very few jobs to apply for. Longer apprenticeships would also allow for apprentices to receive a broader and more comprehensive education.

The OECD Seven Questions report says that: "For young apprentices, an apprenticeship forms part of initial education, and provision typically includes a significant proportion of general education alongside the learning of technical skills" This doesn't really hold true for apprentices in the UK. A longer apprenticeship could both fill that gap and help shield apprentices from unemployment.

Whilst we were looking at other apprenticeship systems we saw that employers in Germany, Austria and New Zealand are given a series of grants to encourage them to employ and train apprentices. Grants are given to employers that:

- Employ the same number of apprentices during the crisis as they did in previous years (DE - €2000)
- Employ More apprentice than in previous years (DE - €3000)
- Employ a new apprentice (NZ - NZ\$9,000)

We think that the idea of rewarding employers that continue to employ and train apprentices is worth exploring. Our focus has been on changes to apprenticeships for under 25's. We already treat younger workers differently through the minimum wage. Younger apprentices joining the world of work can and should be treated differently from older workers using the apprenticeship system to retrain and upskill.

Addressing the mental health crisis

Whilst the apprentice mental health support service does an excellent job it's no longer enough. Moving apprentices into day release and allowing apprentices to meet and speak to their peers outside of the work environment will help to break down the loneliness so many of us have experienced during lockdown. We will also be able to access the support services that full time students in colleges and universities have come to expect.

Mental Health and wellbeing is complex and requires flexible responses. Supporting counselling and wellbeing services should have a positive impact on apprentice mental health. We do not yet know what the longer term impact of the gradual lifting of social distancing may be. The solutions also need to address the root causes apprentices have identified:

- Low wages
- Isolation and loneliness
- Access to services
- Poor Housing
- Precarious work

Cost of Living

We still believe nobody should have to live on less than the living wage. The apprentice minimum wage of £4.15 is exploitatively low. There are however ways to make life easier for apprentices that aren't wage increases. In 2018 around 15% of apprentices were on the apprentice minimum wage. We think this number will grow as employers look to reduce costs.

Political parties have talked and talked about reducing the cost of getting to work for apprentices. Now is the time to turn those promises into reality. Providing nationwide concessionary bus travel to young apprentices would make getting to work affordable for the lowest paid.

Our research showed that a significant number of apprentices don't have the equipment they need to learn and work. All apprentices should have access to the equipment their apprenticeship requires. If apprentices are to accept the apprentice minimum wage we can't then be handed a list of equipment we need to buy out of our £150 a week. The tools for the job, whether they are clippers, wrenches or IT equipment should come with the job.

We acknowledge that these proposals will cost significant sums of public money. We think that we should remember that each young person in an apprenticeship is a young person kept out of unemployment and the cost of Universal Credit.

The green skills revolution starts in the hair salon and the playgroup

Lots of organisations are calling for investment in green technologies and manufacturing. Even the most ambitious of these plans will only create thousands of new apprenticeships, building windmills and learning how to maintain electric cars. We wholeheartedly agree that a green skills revolution should be part of the recovery plan after lockdown.

We see two problems with many of these plans though. Firstly engineering and manufacturing apprenticeships make up less than 10% of apprenticeship starts. Even if every single one of these apprenticeships was transformed into a green apprenticeship there would still be far more apprenticeships in retail, social care or business administration.

Secondly these apprenticeships are almost exclusively done by men. If we want a green economy we need to think big and everyone needs to be involved.

In addition to numeracy and literacy requirements we propose that every apprenticeship include a new Green Economy key skill. Imagine the impact of hundreds of thousands of apprentices understanding the environmental impact of the industry that apprentices are starting their careers in and, more importantly, learning to identify what they and their employers can do to make their work sustainable.

Summary

Thank you for taking the time to read through what we have had to say. Like everyone we are concerned about both the health of apprentices and the communities they live in as well as what will happen to apprentices during a recession.

In summary we would ask the government to pay the wages of apprentices whilst they are on day release. Longer apprenticeships would shield apprentices from the scarring effects of unemployment. Day release would provide better value for money whilst increasing the depth of education apprentices receive. These reformed Apprenticeships could be a tool for government to protect young people from unemployment, reskill and truly build back better.

The leadership team of the National Society of Apprentices

Things we've read:

These are some of the report and ideas that we have talked about in our report.

AoC – Skills recovery plan

<https://www.aoc.co.uk/rebuildresources>

Apprenticeship Pay Survey 2018

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/857209/aps-2018-19-qb-report.pdf

Australian Employer Incentives

<https://www.australianapprenticeships.gov.au/aus-employer-incentives>

Austrian Retention Grant

<https://www.wko.at/service/bildung-lehre/foerderungen-lehre.html>

Cedefop apprenticeship funding systems comparison site

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-apprenticeships>

Concessionary Bus Travel Factsheet

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/774523/concessionary-travel-statistics-2018.pdf

German Corona support for apprenticeships

<https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/Standardartikel/Themen/Schlaglichter/Konjunkturpaket/2020-06-03-eckpunkt Papier.pdf>

IPPR – Guaranteeing the Right Start

<https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/guaranteeing-the-right-start>

New Zealand Apprentice Support Service

<https://www.education.govt.nz/news/new-fund-to-keep-apprentices-in-work/>

OECD Mental Health Report

https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134356-ud5kox3g26&title=Youth-and-COVID-19-Response-Recovery-and-Resilience

OECD report 7 Questions about Apprenticeships

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264306486-en>

Office for National Statistics - Private Rental Costs data

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/indexofprivatehousingrentalprices/may2020>

Social Mobility Commission

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/894303/Apprenticeships_and_social_mobility_report.pdf

Sutton Trust – Covid-19 Impacts on Apprenticeships

<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Covid-19-Impacts-Apprenticeships.pdf>

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