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Apprenticeship, employer engagement and vocational formation: a process of collaboration

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ABSTRACT
With successive changes to apprenticeship policy, shifting emphasis on the amount of involvement of employers in engaging and delivering apprenticeship, and an over-reliance on further education to fill the gaps in the midst of its own storm, this article explores the successful ingredients for employer engagement in apprenticeship and vocational formation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with employers and apprentices from five business in the automotive industry and their further education training providers. The findings suggested that a close collaboration and communication between the college, employer and the young person, based on high levels of trust underpinned three successful mechanisms for ensuring quality apprenticeships: supporting, safeguarding and achieving.

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Introduction

Stability and strategic planning is essential to developing good quality vocational education and training (VET), which can then contribute to increased productivity and economic growth (Laczik and Newton 2019, 41). Apprenticeships, in particular, contribute to this aim and have been a main focus not only of various governments' vision of skill development for the economy but as a social panacea (Keep and Mayhew 2010).

Hitherto, a string of government reviews and reforms of VET, devised to improve the quality and efficiency of further education (FE) and skills training, and specifically apprenticeship (Fuller and Unwin 2009), have served to entrench a supply-led system rather than place more responsibility in the hands of employers (Dolphin and Lanning 2011). In so far as these policies were meant to be effective in changing employer behaviour, which was found to be marginal (Brown, Harris, and Fletcher 2011), it was not clear that employer engagement was '*carefully matched to the expertise, experience, capacity and motivation of employers*' as Huddleston and Laczik (2018a, 262) suggested it should be. While some research shows that some employers value the opportunity to engage with and shape VET (Huddleston and Laczik 2018b), it was far from clear that employers wanted more control and to be placed at the centre of apprenticeship provision in the way reforms have suggested (Hogarth et al. 2014) including more recently in the Skills for Jobs White Paper (DfE (Department for Education) 2021) where employers continued to be placed in the driving seat. The White Paper suggests ways in which the government plans to achieve this; for example, through close collaboration with Chambers of Commerce and through establishing new College Business Centres and Local Skills Improvement plans to drive innovation and collaboration with local employers. However, while the White Paper offers for many a 'great platform to build on' it was also

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suggested that it was not 'revolutionary' and even new (Association of Colleges 21 January 2021). This applies equally to the emphasis on employers at the heart of the skills system. Indeed, Hughes and Smeaton (2006, 13) findings are still valid; employers are looking for training providers to lead them through the maze of the (new) public funding regime and directly support them with resolving any issues, particularly in terms of offering high quality off-the-job training to their apprentices, and closely monitoring and evaluating their apprentices' progress.

At the same time, the FE sector has been in the midst of a massive series of reforms (Keep 2018) around governance, funding, vocational qualification structure and programmes of learning, particularly apprenticeship, with an increasing focus on specialisation and higher-level technical skills development. Moreover, teaching in FE has become untenable with the classroom and teaching measured and judged by a set of more and more quantifiable tasks, underlined by more stringent Ofsted Inspection frameworks (O'Leary 2015). The FE sector has been heavily criticised for its variability of standards in learning and teaching and this is long-standing. As far back as 2002, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in *Success for All*, stated,

> While there is some excellent quality provision, this coexists with too much poor provision. Across the system as a whole, insufficient attention has been given to improving teaching, training and learning . . . For too long, further education and training has been the forgotten sector in education (DfES (Department for Education and Skills) 2002, 10).

Following recommendations in the Augar Report (DfE (Department for Education) 2019), the *Skills for Jobs White Paper* (DfE (Department for Education) 2021) called for increased funding to FE Colleges, in part to aid their ability to recruit and retain a high-quality workforce. Hanley and Orr (2019) have argued that the difficulties in recruiting and retaining VET teachers in the FE sector is a persistent challenge. However, this argument about a high-quality workforce is not new; one such remedy was the requirement to gain a formal teaching qualification to teach in FE introduced for new entrants into the profession in 2001 because, '[I]t was believed that . . . standards would strengthen and improve performance in the classroom (Lawy and Tedder 2011)'. Yet, the Coalition Government ended the statutory requirement to hold a teaching qualification in FE in 2013 (Avis, Fisher, and Thompson 2019). Contrary to these policy developments is the lack of recognition that FE teachers' backgrounds, qualifications and experience are as diverse as the broad ranging curriculum might indicate, and that, 'the mere creation of new qualifications does not, for example, summon into existence the teachers and trainers, the institutions and the resources to deliver the learning and skills that they recognise' (Raffe 2015).

Even with this background, it remains unclear whether handing over apprenticeship completely (including funding) to employers will see the level of employer engagement the government is aiming for (DfE (Department for Education) 2021; James Relly and Keep 2018). Using the automotive and transport industry, we show that employer engagement works best in situations that employ mutual co-operation with FE and that successful employer engagement hinges on strong collaborative processes with the FE college through developing and delivering apprenticeship programmes. It is important to note that while the data collected was in 2013 when apprenticeship frameworks were in operation and before apprenticeship standards and trailblazers were introduced, the findings are highly relevant to the current context.

The case studies

Case studies were used to gain insight into the practices and processes of employer engagement in the apprenticeship programmes delivered at two FE colleges. The two colleges – College A and College B – represent examples of outstanding practice of vocational formation for young people undertaking an apprenticeship, and of employer engagement in their geographical area working in the automotive and transportation sector and the engineering

Table 1. Illustrates the number of interviews in each of the colleges and companies.

College A		College B	
Curriculum Manager	3	Curriculum Manager	1
Employer Link Manager	1	Employer Link Manager	
Lecturer	1	Lecture	1
Large Company A		**Large Company B**	
Training Manager	1	Training Manager	1
Apprentice	1	Apprentice	2
Young person in training	1		
SME A outside the supply chain		**SME B outside the supply chain**	
Training Manager	1	Training Manager	1
Apprentice	2	Apprentice	3
SME A in the supply chain			
Training Manager	1		
Apprentice	1		

sector. These two sectors have much in common and their areas of work are closely interlinked within the automotive and transport industry. Similar to others (Hughes and Smeaton 2006 we approached three different types of companies from within each of the FE networks: a large company, a small-to-medium sized enterprise (SME) in the supply chain of a large company, and an SME outside of the supply chain. This sample enabled us to tentatively test the hypothesis of whether a large company had any impact on training requirements of smaller companies within their supply chain. The inclusion of a SME outside the supply chain was for comparative purposes. Unfortunately we were not able to gain access to a SME in the supply chain for College B; many small companies were working extremely hard in tough economic circumstances and could not afford the time for interviews.

In total, 24 interviews were conducted with representatives from the FE colleges, employers/training managers, and apprentices lasting between 30 minutes and an hour. All were transcribed. Table 1 illustrates the number of interviews in each of the colleges and companies.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality we adopted pseudonyms for the individuals interviewed for this study and alphabetic names for the colleges and companies. The following sections describe the colleges, the companies and the apprentices in this study. The small sample size and specific industry focus means that findings are not necessarily generalisable to other colleges or employers and their practices in vocational formation. Nevertheless they support the hypothesis that employers prefer partnership working rather than being the sole driver of apprenticeship training.

College A

College A was a general FE college, with two main campuses and five smaller campuses, serving three geographical areas. The college provided courses at all levels from pre-entry to higher education (HE) in a variety of subject areas for a total of around 11,500 learners. The college provided apprenticeships for more than 400 learners in 14 subject areas.

College B

College B was also a general FE college with one main campus and one smaller campus. The college had in total about 7,000 learners. It offered apprenticeships in 23 subject areas. Employment-based provision was offered across four faculties and includes several national contracts with large employers. The vast majority of the college's work is government funded.

Companies

Large Company for College A

Large company A has manufactured motorcycles for over 100 years. The company has five factories, two of which are based in the UK and three in Southeast Asia. At the time of the research (2013) the company had six apprentices in one of their UK factories and employed a total of 1,600 people in the UK.

SME A in the supply chain

The SME in this supply chain specialises in high quality precision machining and assembly for the Aerospace, Automotive, Power, Marine and Petrochemical Industries. Eighty per cent of their products are supplied to one manufacturer in the UK. In 2013 the company employed 120–130 people and had two apprentices at levels 2 and 3.

SME A outside the supply chain

This family run business currently has two operations, one in the USA and one in the UK. The factory in the UK designs and manufactures speciality tooling for the metal machining industries. The company's aim is to produce high quality parts and provide worldwide service and support. The UK site employed 50 people and had four apprentices across levels 2 and 3.

Large Company for College B

Large company B is a multinational manufacturer of trucks, buses, construction equipment, and drive systems for marine and industrial applications. Worldwide the company has production facilities in 19 countries and employs 115,000 people. The company had 20 apprentices in 80 dealerships and garages across UK and Ireland.

SME B outside the supply chain

The company is the largest independent provider of commercial vehicle repair and maintenance in the UK. The parent company had over 30 service points across UK and Ireland employing over 500 people. The SME franchise in the study had 12 apprentices across the whole business, with three at the visited site.

The automotive and transport industry

This industry was chosen due to its long history of skills development through apprenticeships and other methods of vocational formation. In England the automotive industry is characterised by a number of features (SMMT 2019; SEMTA 2019):

- Over 800,000 people are employed in the industry and it is a major contributor to the economy;
- The UK automotive industry turned over £82 billion in 2018;
- 59,000 young people began engineering and manufacturing apprenticeships in 2017/2018;
- 20,000 new jobs forecast to be created in automotive sector by 2030;
- Skilled trade occupations make up a significantly larger than average share of the workforce at 26%, compared with 10% of other industries in England;

- Vehicle maintenance and repair businesses account for 55% of employment in the Automotive Retail Sector in England and 77% of those businesses are micro employers, employing less than 10 people;
- 32% of the automotive sector's employees have been through higher education, with 20% of the workforce qualified to Level 6 (Bachelor's degree equivalent) or above while 43% of the sector's employees are qualified to Level 2 (GCSE A*-C) equivalent or below;
- The majority of the workforce is aged between 25 and 44; and
- The workforce is predominantly white and male, with females employed largely in secretarial and administrative jobs.

The Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI) is the Sector Skills Council (SSC) that works with employers and was responsible for developing the apprenticeship frameworks and now the trailblazer standards. Like much manufacturing in the UK, this industry is facing a key set of challenges related to skills and vocational formation (Mosley, Winters, and Wood 2012; Bettsworth and Davies 2016):

- Vacancies in skilled trade occupations with the advancement of Automotive Emerging technologies such as hybrid and electric vehicles and the higher level of technical skills required (current vacancies are at 6,463 with the prediction of 107,000 vacancies in the future);
- Increasing demand for managers and evidence of managerial skills gaps;
- Automotive is not seen as an attractive industry to graduates;
- Apprenticeships are under used in the supply chain; and
- Customer service skills are a key area and need continually updating and enhancing to exceed customer needs.

A collaborative process of developing apprenticeship programmes

A main intention behind the nationally-set apprentice standards, as with the apprenticeship frameworks, was allowing for flexibility. As such the learning programme can be tailored collaboratively to meet local skills needs, the needs of the company and the needs of the young person. This section presents the findings in four main areas: 1) apprenticeship and curricula; 2) programme delivery; 3) pedagogy in apprenticeship; and 4) effect of company size.

1. Apprenticeship and curricula

Both colleges followed the IMI Awards. The courses contain the curriculum requirements and assessment guides, and the marking schemes are provided although all assessment is externally verified through the IMI. The company develops practical vocation-specific skills and employability skills while the FE College engages in more theoretical preparation of the apprentice, with some workshop based training, and developed functional skills and Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS). The colleges' place emphasis on developing the foundation of vocational knowledge; while vocation-specific skills are demonstrated in the college workshop, the practical vocational skills are developed through practicing in the workplace. In the college, all apprentices develop knowledge and skills in their vocational area with the intention that these skills are transferable and can then be widely used in a variety of situations at different companies. Both colleges use a similar process to develop the curriculum with the employer:

> We discuss with the employer, 'What's the apprentice going to be doing?' So we identify the area so they're [the employer] happy with it. We would then open up the qualification unit and go through the unit with the actual team leader and/or with the manager in the company. We'd go through the units and ask if the tasks can be covered in the workplace. We're actually developing a method of assessment for that person. *Link Manager, College A*

A programme specific to large companies, such as the College B programme for a large motor vehicle company, has company specific content added to the course. As explained by one of the lecturers, 'we put the major motor vehicle company spin on it'. Also the content has to be altered to suit the equipment that the college uses. There is flexibility in the apprenticeship with the ability to specialise elements according to the college and employer needs

> We can rewrite parts to suit what equipment we use. They're all guidelines, they're all there for development and we quite often do that. We will take, for example, if we had the transmission unit, we will take it to, say there are a group of large motor vehicle company lads in that week, to suit that transmission. And then if we looked at a Eurotronic transmission, which is electronically controlled, we would have to tweak it to suit that as well. *Link Manager, College B*.

A tension arose where there were considerable overlaps in skills development. Delineation of responsibility occurred after much discussion between the college and the employer on those areas where they were considered experts, then working in close collaboration to enhance skills development and diminish potential difficulties. The overarching aim for both colleges and employers is for the apprentice to succeed in his/her apprenticeship albeit given the client relationship the FE college did allow the employer a more prominent position. This was, however, considered a key part of relationship maintenance and the college tutors took it in their stride to deliver the curriculum.

2. Programme delivery

The two colleges approached programme delivery for the companies in this study in slightly different ways, primarily to meet the needs of the company. College A adopted a hybrid approach – a combination of day release and block release – while College B used block release.[1]

College A

College A offered two types of delivery for the apprenticeship. Some programmes were delivered as day release where the apprentice attended college one day a week for a period of time (for example over a year) and the remaining four days were spent at work (some apprentices worked Saturdays also). A small number of programmes were delivered through block release. The apprentice was released from work for a block period of time to attend college, generally one or two week blocks a few times a year. Block release was more common in two situations. First, in vocational areas that were less in demand and with limited provision for a qualification nationally; second, when tailored provision was developed for a large company with several outlets across the country, i.e. when the college and workplace were not in close proximity. For example, block release was used for forklift apprenticeships as there were only two FE providers in Britain where this training is offered.

The apprentices were on a full-time employment contract with their employer. Occasionally the employer did not want to release the apprentice because of workplace demands, especially on block release (Employer Link, college A). In tough economic climates the college understood that this may happen and a key feature of the programme which required a lot of effort at College A was the careful negotiation between the college and the employer.

College B

The motor vehicle engineering apprenticeship programme at College B was designed in blocks. Apprentices attended college for 40 hours a week in blocks of two weeks (five times during year 1, four blocks in year 2 and three blocks in year 3). During that time they were accommodated by host families near the college, reimbursed for any travel expenses they incurred, and were paid full wages by their employer. The time at college was designed to teach the apprentices all the necessary theory

and knowledge, but also give them time to research, and 'stretch and challenge' the knowledge they acquired. This was not to say that they spent most of their days at lectures or in front of computers. Rather, they had practical demonstrations and practised tasks themselves. Their time in college was carefully balanced between acquiring theoretical knowledge and practicing vocational skills. Approximately twice a week they were given time to practise their knowledge in the workshop setting, which was very well equipped and supplied to a very high standard. The practical application of knowledge in the college workshop and the workplace differed slightly due to varieties in machinery and equipment, but the college workshop was designed to resemble the workplace as much as possible. This programme delivery structure provided the apprentices with the basic knowledge necessary for the workplace, such as health and safety at work and the apprentices felt that the knowledge gained at college about components, tools and machines aided their confidence and helped them during the assessment.

College B and the employers believed block release had its advantages over day release. One Manager (SME B outside the supply chain) commented that block release was:

> Better for the apprentices as they have more time at the college at once which allows him to come back [to college] the next day and clarify with the tutor anything he did not fully get. A two-week block also gives them enough time to cover all the course work.

Even so, there were constant challenges around ownership of the programme through the delivery. Company B saw the programme very much as its own with the college helping to deliver it:

> We need to make our apprenticeship programme, irrespective of the curriculum, we need to make it fit with our demand, so that they [apprentices] are always using every skill and knowledge that the apprentice gains is used in the daily work of the workshops. And that's not something that happens outside of the work. *Employer, Company B*

Because of the importance of the relationship to the college with this company, they often provided more leeway in conversations around ownership and delivery; the College reported that diplomacy was a key element to the employer link person's role.

3. Pedagogy in apprenticeship programmes

The two colleges in this study approached teaching and learning at the college and in the work place in a similar manner. The colleges and employers worked hard to equip the apprentices with skills and knowledge that were relevant and useful in employment. All interviewees saw the benefits of learning through apprenticeships:

> . . . obviously when they go into college they're learning the theoretical side of the job, and obviously doing a lot of practical because they've got great facilities at College B, but then back into the workplace it's fully hands on. So they're getting the best of both worlds, they're getting the theoretical at the college, and then it's all purely hands on experience in the workplace. *Director, SME B outside supply chain*

The apprenticeship curriculum was taught by college lecturers and by experienced workplace employees. The learning occurred through observation to start with, then imitation, practice and as soon as the apprentices were capable and confident in their abilities they were left to conduct tasks independently. In the colleges the technical certificate was taught by the lecturers experienced in their field, often with many years of industry experience. Another specialist lecturer at the college taught the functional skills, and the vocational qualification was completed through tasks at the workplace with a field assessor from the college. The lecturers' knowledge was an important aspect of the programme delivery because they needed both the practical knowledge and also the theoretical knowledge on a much wider variety of cars and trucks than an apprentice would see in one workplace. The college was trying to meet the needs of a variety of companies all with different product specifications as well as adhere to the curriculum. The college tutors were aware of these different requirements placed on them and the different sorts of teaching practice they needed to demonstrate to help the apprentices learn:

> It's not all pedagogy. I like to think that they learn best if they don't know they're learning. Experimentation. Getting them to enjoy what they're doing. Maybe even breaking something to learn from it. Also I think that the tutor must be credible in his subject. I think it's important, [apprentices] must know that. If they've not got faith in the tutor . . . we have got some tutors here that do suffer with that, because they may be weak in one area or another. For instance, somebody that's worked on cars couldn't teach air brakes, because they wouldn't have had the experience on it. *Lecturer, College B*

However, any potential gaps in knowledge about more specialist areas were covered in the workplace teaching. The teaching in the workplace used activities that could be routine tasks and promoted learning through more exciting things, which built upon the basic skills and knowledge they developed in the college:

> . . . that means getting involved in diagnostics, using laptop computers, using technology, and then that also makes [apprentices] have to think for themselves more, and use the relevant symptoms and information that they've gathered, to make a judgment about what the repair needs to be. So that is a bit more exciting for them. So we teach them in the workplace to do the routine stuff and then we move them onto the diagnostic things. The other thing they learn in the workplace is craft, you know, in their hands. Because you need to spend a lot of hours doing things with your hands, to learn the craft, the adeptness of doing something, whether it's using spanners or other tools, files, drills, all sorts of different things that they need. They get basic training in the college on those and they get some time, practically to do things in college, but that is always a starting point so that they can go into the workshop back home and start to do that work. *Learning and Development Manager, Large Company B*

The two colleges in this study acknowledged that even though in general they faced many of the problems outlined for FE in the introduction to this paper, they were fortunate that in the areas of engineering and automotive and transport there was a full cadre of experienced tutors. In part, this was due to the special relationship between the employers and the college whereby the tutors did spend time in industry. The management team in both colleges were keenly aware of this privileged position.

4. Effect of company size

There were fundamental differences in the way the participating large and small-to-medium size enterprises (SMEs) in this study were resourced to first employ and then support apprentices. It is important to acknowledge these differences because they influenced, for example, the support (or lack of) offered to apprentices, the range of experiences, and progression opportunities for the apprentices. Although FE interviewees believed their overall approaches to the different sized companies were the same, they reported that the size of the company needed to be taken into account when it came to practicalities. For example, the large companies had many different apprenticeship frameworks operating in parallel, and consequently there were more FE staff in contact with the different departments of the company at any one time. Furthermore, the large companies were differently resourced from SMEs. They often had a designated Human Resource (HR) Department, which guided and monitored the apprentices' progress. Larger companies offered the possibilities of spending time in the different workshops and settings to their apprentices during their training. In addition to the HR department, apprentices had designated mentors, who usually were a line manager or team leader.

The colleges worked with many SMEs from sole traders to small private limited companies. For these smaller employers apprenticeship was a tradition. Many of the employers themselves were once apprentices, they believed in this mode of training, and they had a vested interest in the apprentice through the reproduction of their vocational knowledge. SMEs believed it was through this vocational formation that their business grew. According to one SME interviewee, he could not simply advertise for engineers, because there were no qualified people readily available in that particular engineering field. It was for such reasons small employers trained their qualified workforce

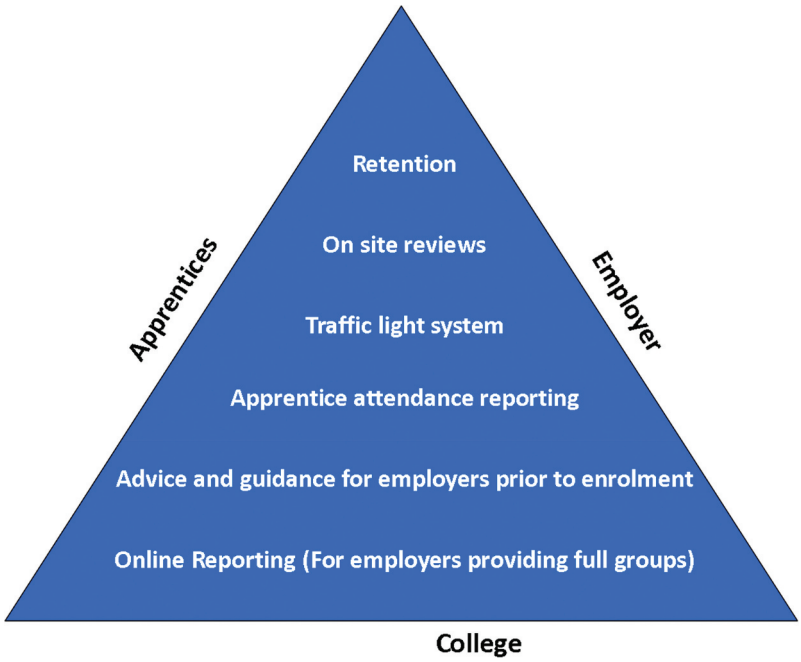

Figure 1. Co-operation necessary for a successful apprenticeship at College B.

themselves through apprenticeship (or poached from other employers). In addition, often the college had only one point of contact in the SME, who was most likely the owner or the general manager.

All stakeholders agreed the right support mechanism underpinned the apprentices development and helped companies, which was developed through the training needs analysis. However, there were clear differences in the amount of support offered by the companies primarily in relation to their size; that is, larger companies offered more support. Yet, we could not identify differences between the SME in the supply chain and the SME outside the supply chain: the large company did not seem to have any influence on the apprentice's training in the SME in their supply chain, which was surprising and disappointing.

In summary, there were many aspects to the apprenticeship programmes successful delivery and completion. A key feature throughout each of the stages of the process was communication between each of the stakeholder groups. Figure 1, developed by College B, summarises well the close co-operation and communication needed between the mentor (workplace based), the trainer/assessor (college based) and the apprentice, for a successful apprenticeship. This process was extremely similar in College A.

The apprentices' voice

Apprenticeship programmes

Apprentices are at the heart of vocational formation yet it is often their voices that are overlooked (Lawson, 2020). Although the apprentices in this study pursued different apprenticeships frameworks, across levels 2 and 3, with different employers, the interviews suggested they shared some common views and experiences. Overall the apprentices appreciated the opportunity of having an apprenticeship, and spoke articulately of the advantages and attractions of being an apprentice, especially the combination of earning while gaining a qualification:

Table 2. Provides details of the participants in the study.

Apprentice	Age	Gender	College	Company	Vocational qualification aiming for	Qualifications achieved
Mike	19	M	A	Large company	• Mechanical Engineering (CAD)	• A-level mathematics • Physics • Product design
Don	20	M	A	Large company	• HNC Mechanical Engineering • Level 2 NVQ • CNC Programming	• Level 3 BTEC Diploma Engineering
Tim	23	M	A	SME inside supply chain	• BTEC • HNC	
Jake	18	M	A	SME outside supply chain	• NVQ Level 3 Engineering	• NVQ Level 2 Engineering
Alan	17	M	A	SME outside supply chain	• Level 3 Engineering	• NVQ Level 2 Engineering
Dan	16	M	B	Large company	• NVQ Level 3 HGV mechanic	
Bert	17	M	B	Large company	• IMI Heavy Vehicle Level 3	
Rob	18	M	B	SME outside supply chain	• HGV mechanic	• NVQ level 2 HGV
Rhys	28	M	B	SME outside supply chain	• HGV mechanic	
Doni	20	M	B	SME outside supply chain	• NVQ Level 2	• NVQ Level 2 Railway Engineering • BTEC Level 3 Sport • BTEC Level 3 Science

Mike is not an apprentice, but on a sponsorship programme. Within the sponsorship programme he participates in a 10-week training course in college, and works for the company the remainder of time in return for sponsoring his studies.

> I'm getting paid, gaining qualifications they pay for, and gaining the experience that I need. What more can you ask for really? *Don*

> With apprenticeships you're getting both, from the start, you're getting paid for it, you're learning, you're applying all your skills at work, and then obviously once you're qualified they're going to keep you on, because they've trained you up. So you're getting all of it in one really, that's why I like it. *Dan, Company B*

Most of the apprentices made a conscious decision not to stay in post-16 full-time education and to pursue a career in the motor vehicle and transport industry. Most entered the apprenticeship once they completed compulsory education,[2] although a few had completed either A-level qualifications or a post-16 qualification in a college (see Table 2).

On-the-job training

On-the-job training was highlighted as one of the advantages of combining learning with working because the apprentices saw immediate benefits of learning through completing tasks relevant to their job. However, some apprentices noted that they found it hard to be interested in the learning and training if they thought they would not be using the particular skill, knowledge and experience in the future particularly if they were with a smaller employee that did not offer a breadth of learning opportunity. Yet even when they could not necessarily appreciate particular learning moments at a certain point in time, overall they expressed a sense of pride when they were part of a process that contributed to the final product.

Apprentices also recognised that they worked with experts in their fields, who had 15–20 year's work experience, and had often worked for different companies during their careers. They also talked of other skills they developed during their training in the job such as team-working skills, communication skills and becoming more self-confident over time:

> You learn most of the stuff like that (transferable skills) at work, from actually doing the job. It's not the sort of thing they can teach you at college, you've got to do the job to learn how to do that. *Bert*

Off-the-job training

Apprentices often expressed their (mixed) views through comparing their experiences in the workplace and in the FE College. At college their time was divided between lectures, research, time for assignments and test preparation, and observation and practice in the workshop. The apprentices considered their time in the FE workshops the most valuable when they saw how to apply the theoretical knowledge that they learnt in the classroom:

> They do lectures up there, explain things to you, and then you go into a workshop and they'll show you how to take something apart and how it works, and then we'll go and discuss it and do writing about it. *Bert*

There was a similar issue with regard to transferring knowledge developed from the off-the-job training to the workplace. This was primarily to do with work allocation. There were occasions when the knowledge and skill learnt at college could not be practiced in the workplace because the production processes did not necessarily provide the opportunities needed to complete the college task or put into practice the knowledge and skill learned:

> A lot of it that we do at college, we can only really do [at work] if the job comes in, because you can't really set it up unless it's there. For example, if, say, we're working at college on the braking system or something, if something doesn't come in that needs new brakes, then you can't work on it obviously. *Don*

Even so, many of the apprentices enjoyed their time in college and many of them valued the transferability of the skills learned:

> 'What I learn at college is, I can apply that to anything really, because they teach us about cars a lot there as well. So, if you're covering cars and you're covering trucks, it's a lot of stuff that can be applied to lots of different things'. *Bert*

The apprentices' comments suggested their college learning was complementary to their on-the-job training and both were necessary for successful completion of the apprenticeship.

Progression within and outside the company

Apprentices assumed that the company would not pay for their apprenticeship unless the employer saw long-term opportunities for them within the company. Consequently, many apprentices saw their employer's engagement with their training as some security for their future. Some also noted that if there was an internal vacancy they would be the company's preferred choice rather than someone unknown. Many apprentices carefully thought through the potential future benefits of their programme and were willing to be curtailed at present in order to 'cash' future benefits:

> You're getting the qualification as well, so they [peers who went into full-time non-apprenticeship employment] might get the job say, at £10 an hour, and you might be on £5 an hour, but they might be on that for the rest of their lives, whereas you're going to keep gaining, so you're going to get more money than them eventually. *Alan*

Most felt that in general obtaining a qualification was easy, but demonstrating years of work experience is vital for securing and doing the job in the future. A strong belief among the apprentices was that employers would favour those young people who have real experience in their field of interest rather than those who only have college qualifications:

> I think if I applied for a job somewhere else, and I've shown that I've, at such a young age . . . to go straight into work and doing college as well, I think that looks good. I think it looks a bit better than just going to college, because you've got more experience as well. So, if you went for a new job, and I've gone to college, and I handed a CV in, and you've got someone with the experience of actually doing the work whilst at college. *Alan*

Some apprentices reported that during the first 12–18 months of their training the employer tried to teach them as much as possible without narrowing the training down to one specific track, which provided them with a good overview of the work processes. Some also commented that they were (sometimes) offered tasks and were allowed to solve problems themselves rather than follow instructions. This problem solving gave them a sense of challenge and helped their vocational skill development.

All of the interviewed apprentices were motivated and committed to their occupation and industry and saw opportunities for progression. They undertook their apprenticeship and at the same time completed other training courses on new machinery and new work processes in the workplace. They also aimed for qualifications, such as HNC[3] and HND[4] that could lead to higher education. Not all expressed an interest to complete a degree but they clearly appreciated the possibility to progress and gain a higher degree in the future if they decided to do so.

Conclusion

Clearly, and seemingly despite recruitment problems in FE, there is much good practice occurring in vocational formation through the dedication and belief of employers, young people and the FE sector (see James Relly 2020).

In this study, the relationship between the colleges and employers was successful due to an implicit mechanism for jointly ensuring positive outcomes for the apprentices completing their apprenticeships. This mechanism was characterised by three main actions:

1) To support;
2) To safeguard; and
3) To achieve.

These actions required close communication and collaboration between the college, employer and the young person, based on high levels of trust, which Fuller and Unwin (2019) also advocated for. To elaborate, in each step towards the final outcome of the apprenticeship stakeholders: supported each other; they safeguarded their own interests while making sure the interests of other stakeholders were considered; and ensured apprenticeships were completed.

The quality of engagement between the college and the workplace is very much based on the relationship between key people at both organisations. For example, the colleges take the leading role by appointing an Employer Link Manager who develops and monitors employer engagement, ensures communication about arising issues and most importantly ensures positive resolution to any problems. An important aspect of both of the colleges' employer engagement strategies was communication. It was evident that the colleges made special effort in engaging with employers, collaborating and communicating to develop excellent long term relationships.

The college had expertise in delivering apprenticeships, which are complex and not always fully understood by employers. It also had expertise in teaching, training and understanding young people. Employers are experts in vocational skills needed in the workplace, in the newest technologies, work processes, tools and materials. They offer work experience to young people and a platform for learning and practising their skills in a real work environment. The exploitation of this expertise from both parties maximises the preparation of the apprentice, their success, and his/her opportunities after completion.

The Government has planned (DfE (Department for Education) 2021) for employers to have more responsibility for apprenticeships. It wants to 'explore how to support employers to access and navigate the whelk sills system . . . Our aim is to ensure all meployers, particularly small and medium-szied enterprises, and those who find the current system hard to engage with, have clear access routes and can navigate the skills offers provided in further education (ibid., p. 27). The lack of recognition that further education colleges are already undertaking this work is, unfortunately, typical. As with many government policies, the importance of relationships is often lost or is, at the very least, silent as Keep (2015) has noted:

> The norm for many years has been that government will enact changes in VET without any serious attempt to involve the institutions that deliver VET or those who work within them . . . . As a result, national policy makers have very little knowledge or understanding of frontline practice or how their policies play out in the real world.

In setting out the vision for apprenticeships, *English Apprenticeships: Our 2020 vision* (BIS 2015) the lack of voice given to further education and employers was not surprising but was disappointing. It has been echoed in the *Skills for Jobs White Paper* (DfE (Department for Education) 2021). Employers and further education working together are the key for successful apprenticeships. Over a decade ago, Payne (2007) highlighted the inherent problem of the then government introducing an employer-led, demand-driven system that did not include collaboration of some sort and predicted failure. Moreover, Brockman, Clarke, and Winch (2010) argued when the Apprenticeship Frameworks were being introduced that the exclusion of the trade unions and the FE sector meant that there was no meaningful partnership relationship with those whose commitment was essential to the successful implementation of the [apprentice] framework, putting it again at odds with other leading European countries. Clearly, the colleges and FE providers in this study have collaborated despite government policy, and it is this collaboration that has been the key to success for these apprentices and their employers. Pitting employers and FE colleges against each other, as so much political rhetoric tends to do, is not the solution. Instead, examples such as the ones in this study show how collaboration, not competition, provide better learning environments for young people undertaking an apprenticeship. Supporting, safeguarding and achieving success remains the key mechanisms for successful collaboration between FE colleges and employers in the introduction of any new reform.

Notes

1. These were the delivery approaches used for the companies in this study. The colleges adopted a different mix of these approaches for other companies once a needs assessment was completed.
2. In 2013, compulsory schooling ended at age 16; from 2015 it is 18 years of age.
3. A Higher National Certificate (HNC) is a work-related course provided by higher and further education colleges in the UK. It takes one year to complete, or two years part time and is generally equivalent to first year of university.
4. A Higher National Diploma (HND) takes two years to complete full time, or three to four year's part time. Generally an HND is equivalent to second year of university.

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