

UK apprenticeships: Opportunity or exploitation?

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Abstract

This essay examines current perceptions of UK apprenticeship pay from multiple perspectives. The essay takes a qualitative approach with each of the stakeholders involved, policy-makers, apprentices, employers and trade unions. The argument is that current regulatory levels of apprentice pay are low, leaving apprentices open to exploitation from some employers. However, the data also indicates that pay can be offset by developing skills. Furthermore, what also appears to be needed in a successful apprenticeship scheme is the presence of familial support. This, it is argued, makes it difficult for those young people, who do not come from stable solvent family backgrounds to consider being an apprentice.

Keywords: add up to five key words in alphabetical order

Introduction

Apprenticeship schemes are currently a highly topical subject in the UK. The debate on apprenticeship schemes has been fueled by political parties in the run-up to the general election of 2015. The Conservative party promised to create three million new apprenticeship schemes, whilst the Labour party promised 80,000 new apprenticeship schemes each year (Wintour, 2015). It is suggested by Lewis (2015) that the focus on apprenticeships is an attempt to garner votes from a younger disinterested generation of voters.

In recent times there has been increased discussion regarding apprentice levels of pay. For example, the business secretary Vince Cable has been particularly vocal in support for a rise in the apprentice National Minimum Wage (Horsley, 2015). Additionally, trade unions have expressed concern at the level of apprenticeship pay which they label as exploitative (BBC, 2015), they also express concern that apprentice schemes are not fully inclusive for young people due to the low level of pay (NUS, 2015). On the 17 March, 2015 the UK coalition government announced a 20 per cent increase in the apprenticeship National Minimum Wage, which will be implemented in October 2015. It represents the largest ever increase in the apprentice National Minimum Wage (GOV.UK, 2015). However, the question still remains whether the rise is substantial enough to make a significant difference to apprentices.

This essay explores apprenticeship pay as a key area of employee relations. It considers how apprentices perceive their current level of apprenticeship pay and critically evaluates the impact on young people's future careers and inclusion. The essay considers the perspectives of employers, policy-makers, and trade unions within this evaluation. Thus the predominant aim of the essay is to investigate apprenticeship schemes, the perceived low level of pay, and to discuss to what extent they are either an opportunity to develop new skills whilst earning, or an opportunity for businesses to gain cheap labour. The main research question of the research project considers: *"Are apprenticeship scheme wages exploited by business as a way to gain cheap labour, or do apprenticeships offer value and opportunity for people to develop skills whilst earning?"*

In order to answer the research question, the following secondary research questions were devised:

- How do apprentices perceive their level of pay?
- How do apprentices perceive their type of employment?
- What opportunities does an apprenticeship scheme present to employers?

The essay is structured as followed. After an extensive literature review of apprenticeship schemes and apprenticeship pay, the investigative strategy of the report is outlined. Following this the interview findings are presented, the findings are then critically evaluated using existing theoretical perspectives drawn from the literature review, before finally drawing conclusions.

Literature review

An apprenticeship is defined by Hogarth and Gambin (2014) as the encompassing of off-the-job learning and on-the-job application. However, the term is complex and can be defined in several ways (Hogarth and Gambin, 2014). A modern definition of an apprenticeship is "a structured programme of vocational preparation, sponsored by an employer, juxtaposing part-time education with on-the-job training and work experience, leading to recognised vocational qualification at craft or higher level..." (Ryan and Unwin, 2001: 100).

Apprenticeship literature is generally divided between traditional and post-modern apprenticeships. Traditional apprenticeships were exclusive to traditional male industries (Gospel, 1998). The seminal sociological text by Willis (1977) discusses traditional apprenticeship schemes and presents them as the ultimate ambition for working class 'lads' who do not conform to the education system. Willis outlines how it offered them an opportunity to construct a career and be inducted into working class culture of work's customs and norms, usually monitored through elements of skill demarcation by trade unions in their heartlands of manufacturing work. But apprenticeships declined in the nineties. So modern apprenticeships were introduced in 1993 by a Conservative Government keen to revive them. Modern apprenticeships incorporated traditional (skill training) and new features to make them more

accessible, especially for women and ethnic minorities. The new features included the recognition of employment status for apprentices, off-the-job training provided by colleges and private providers, a wider spread of opportunities in non-traditional industries, funding to contribute to off-the-job training costs, and an industry-wide framework based on NVQs was created in order to develop key skills of apprentices (Gospel, 1998). Apprenticeships currently span across many industries and account for one-fifth of the youth employment cohort (Fuller and Unwin, 2003). However, Brockmann et al. (2010) argue apprenticeship schemes remain confined to traditional trades, such as electricians. Whilst Willmott and Schofield (2003) accuse modern apprenticeships as simply being a marketing term to bring young people into employment, there remains a shortage of accurate information on modern apprenticeship schemes (Fuller and Unwin, 2003).

Apprentices aged 16-18 are entitled to the apprentice National Minimum Wage of £2.73 an hour (GOV.UK, 2014). This rate will rise to £3.30 in October 2015 (GOV.UK, 2015). Apprentices over the age of 19 are also entitled to the apprentice National Minimum Wage for the first 12 months of their apprenticeship. However after completion of the first 12 months of their apprenticeship, depending on their age, they are entitled to receive either the youth National Minimum Wage of £5.13 an hour or the National Minimum Wage of £6.50 (Mirza-Davies, 2014).

Gospel (1998) argues that apprentices have been exploited as cheap labour through-out history (Gospel, 1998). Walford, too (1988), claimed that young apprentices considered their work to be slave labour, expressing concerns they were simply cheap labour for their employers. Cooper (2003) asserts that apprenticeship pay is comparable to poverty pay and highlights negative trends which exist in apprenticeship pay. Similarly a recent NUS (2015) report states that apprenticeship pay is exploitative and is not enough to cover basic living expenses, such as travel, rent and food. In order to cover these expenses many apprentices are having to seek additional part-time employment. It is argued the exploitative wage results in potential apprentices being excluded from the scheme due to unaffordability. London Councils (2012), for example, reported that many young people would in fact be better off receiving benefits than partaking in an apprenticeship scheme. Further, it is also argued the low wage of apprentice scheme creates an inclusivity to those with financially secure parental support, with low income families being unable to afford the resulting loss of child benefit (NUS, 2015). Winterbotham et al. (2014) found that 24 per cent of 16-18 year old apprentices are paid below their entitled minimum wage rate, a worrying trend when the level of pay is below the minimum wage. Furthermore, Behling and Speckesser (2013) state there is unequal apprenticeship wage distribution between gender, ages, and industries. This is reflected in the TUC (2013) report which states that females have no representation in the highest paid apprenticeship occupations. In contrast, Ryan (2012) argues that the relative pay of apprentices is at its highest ever level, whilst the relative importance of pay to apprentices is low (Karmel and Mlotkowski, 2010).

The psychological contract concept explains the relative low importance of pay to apprentices, how wages are offset against gains in skills and qualifications. Walker et al. (2012) discuss the

complexity of the psychological contract in place between the employee and employer in terms of exchange of resources for reward. A positive relationship exists between apprentices and employers with high levels of agreement of what forms the psychological contract. However, this study is criticised for its low response rates and not being representative of the apprentice population, which now extends across a wide range of industries. Furthermore, much research into the psychological contract focuses solely on employee perspective (Guest, 1998, cited in Walker et al. 2012). This essay will consider the perspective of both the apprentice and the employer in order to better understand this aspect of apprenticeships.

A theory which does show apprenticeship pay from the employer's perspective is the apprenticeship investment and substitution strategies by Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner (2008). It is argued that an organisation may follow either an investment or substitution strategy. Organisations who engage in an investment strategy treat apprentices as a source of valuable human capital for the future. Whereas those following a substitution strategy use apprentices merely as cheap labour to substitute unskilled workers. In Germany 44 per cent of companies follow a clear investment strategy, whereas 19 per cent follow a substitution strategy, while the remainder is more of a mix of the two concepts.

Concluding, the literature presents modern apprenticeship schemes as a complex government designed framework with clear political imperatives to give young people who may not have necessary academic qualifications or want higher education as a route into employment. However, apprenticeship pay as set by the government is perceived and criticised as being exploitative in some literature. The reasoning behind this can be explained by the concept of the psychological contract and the investment and substitution strategies. It has been discovered there is an insignificant scope of literature dedicated to apprenticeship pay and it is this gap that this essay wants to plug.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to investigate whether apprentices and other stakeholders perceive apprenticeships as of value to both employers and employees, and to answer the research question of whether apprenticeships are an opportunity or exploitative. One issue of using a qualitative research method is that it involves a low sample number, resulting in difficulties in generalising the findings (Walliman, 2011). However, qualitative data can provide detailed and in-depth findings which could then be extensively analysed thematically to offer insight into how apprenticeships are perceived and experienced. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data provided by the participants, identifying common themes that appeared in the data. The themes were then evaluated in relation to topics emerging from the literature and an argument created (Aronson, 1994).

Data was collected from the identified sample using face-to-face interviews, a common method of research (Neuman 2014). The interviews were semi-structured with preset questions and

objectives, but also had flexibility that lets the interviewee talk and permits the interviewer to create impromptu questions linked to this discussion (Valderstoep and Johnston, 2009). The interview questions were devised to begin with simple questions about the participant's background. It is vital to begin an interview with this type of question to build rapport, creating a mutual trusting relationship (Abbe and Brandon, 2014). However, in the case of the political participant it was sometimes difficult to gain answers to some of the questions, and may be due to a reluctance for politicians to be too categorical, as they run the risk of their words being used out of context.

A pilot interview was conducted to gain feedback on the interview questions and technique (Neuman, 2014). The feedback from the pilot interview resulted in questions being rephrased and an adaption in the interview style to create a less formal discussion. The participants were contacted by e-mail and telephone to arrange interview times, dates and locations. On the advice of Tracy (2013), several interview locations were presented to the participant who then decided which was best for them. Each of the participants were given a description of the interview's purpose, length, and the topics covered. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. At the end of the interview participants were debriefed. The collected results were then transcribed.

Sample

A purposive sample of the population was identified to participate in the research. The purposive sample involves selecting participants based on the knowledge of the researcher, who have something to say on this topic. A purposive sampling method is practical for research with a small amount of time available (Neuman, 2014). However, purposive samples are prone to research bias, the findings of the study must be carefully considered and while they cannot be generalised to the whole population, they can offer insight into how issues of apprenticeship pay are perceived and experienced (Valderstoep and Johnston, 2009).

The purposive sample included:

- Apprentices: Four apprentices from a variety of industries, including sales, insurance, hairdressing, and manufacturing, were identified to provide insight from the apprentice perspective.
- Employers: Two multi-national companies, a major insurance company and a plastics manufacturing company were identified. Within these two human resource staff were selected to provide the employer insight.
- A Member of Parliament from the East of England was identified to provide a policy-maker perspective of apprentice pay.
- Trade Union: a representative of Unison was identified to consider apprentice pay from the perspective of Trade Unions. The views of a Trade Union will provide political balance and provide insight based upon their heritage in promoting traditional value of apprenticeships.

As the essay discusses the sensitive topic of payment terms, issues of confidentiality and anonymity were important to consider. In order to protect the participants they each signed a consent form stating their willingness to participate in the interview. Confidentiality was provided as two of the apprentices' were employees of the interviewed employers. In order to respect requests of anonymity from the apprentices participants, pseudo numbers were used instead of names, as recommended by Valderstoep and Johnston (2009).

Findings

Low apprenticeship wage

The most significant finding of the interviews was the consensus amongst all of the parties that the current apprenticeship minimum wage was insufficient: "It is way too low" (Apprentice 4, Hairdressing). The apprentices all had negative perceptions of the apprentice National Minimum Wage. In regard to the apprentice National Minimum Wage, the apprentices stated that travel and living costs were difficult to meet:

"It is barely enough to pay the bus fares to work each week..." (Apprentice 1, Sales),

"No one could possibly live on £2 something an hour" (Apprentice 3, Manufacturing).

A notion of unfairness emerged as one apprentice who received well above the minimum wage rate indicated:

"It's ridiculous... it takes the piss out of people" (Apprentice 2, Insurance).

While the Unison representative said that the low rate is unfair and that his union is campaigning for change: "we don't like it and we're campaigning to get it altered".

As indicated earlier the apprentice minimum wage has been recently increased by the current government but this was enacted after the research was collected. The MP agreed with the perception of the apprentices that the current apprenticeship minimum wage was too low, however also recognised the affordability of the apprenticeship minimum wage from an employer's perspective:

"Well, yes it is low. I accept that, which is why it needs to be kept under review".

Here interviewing the employers offers a useful perspective on this point, but also about fairness:

"No I don't think it's very fair" (Insurance employer)

It is the case that this employer pays well above the minimum wage level to its apprentices. But this was not necessarily the viewpoint of the manufacturing employer, while they thought the level was low they also picked up on the politicians point about affordability.

“I recognise it is low...but we must consider the costs” (Manufacturing employer).

It may be unlike the large long-standing insurance company, yet the manufacturing company was more concerned about labour costs and profitability.

Travel and living costs

A common sub-theme when discussing the perceived low level of pay with the apprentices was the cost of travel expenses. Three out of the four apprentices made specific reference to the cost of travel:

“I was barely earning enough to get to and from work as well as pay for other things that I needed” (Apprentice 1, Sales).

While another apprentice commented on the cost of commuting to London daily:

“...so that takes up quite a large amount of my wages” (Apprentice 2, Insurance).

The high cost of rail travel clearly indicates that if this apprentice did not receive the much higher rate of apprentice pay he/she would struggle to do their apprenticeship, while for the manufacturing apprentice it is a struggle to pay for petrol and to keep his car on the road. Likewise, the Unison representative identified this as a similar problem amongst apprentices in his own project:

“What if you are stuck out in the country with just one or two buses a day? You know its crackers and doesn’t work” (Unison representative).

The above comments indicate how travel costs can be an influencing factor in whether young people could consider apprenticeship employment, particularly if they live in more remote regions where public transport is limited or if they have to commute by rail, where it would be difficult for apprentices on minimum apprentice pay to afford this without the support of other people.

Additionally, the theme of living standards occurred regularly among the apprentices with most perceiving their standard of living as poor. The sales apprentice was aggrieved with his living standards and felt they were not improving:

“I couldn’t spend anything on material goods on the wage provided, I wasn’t making any improvements in my living standards” (Apprentice 1, Sales).

The manufacturing apprentice made reference to how cautious he/she had to be when spending. However, he/she also realised an increase in living standards since moving on to the National Minimum Wage:

“Now I am getting the National Minimum Wage it’s much easier... I can even put some money aside for saving” (Apprentice 3, Manufacturing).

The hairdressing apprentice expressed annoyance at the length of time it took to save money:

“I had to wait a long time to save up for things that I wanted” (Apprentice 4, Hairdressing).

Commonly, all four of the apprentices relied on the support of their family and all lived at home with their parents. The sale apprentice stated he had little choice as it was the only way to afford the apprenticeship. The higher paid insurance apprentice was currently saving for a deposit for his own property, and expressed the desire to move out from his parents. However he/she also recognised the cost savings of living with parents:

“living at my parents my costs are pretty low” (Apprentice 2, Insurance).

The hairdressing apprentice considered themselves to be entirely financially dependent on their parents:

“I’m not financially dependent on myself at all really... Mum and Dad pay for everything” (Apprentice 4, Hairdressing).

The plastics manufacturer who employed over 20 apprentices also stated that:

“The majority of our apprentices live at home with their parents”.

The role of family support in apprenticeships was also mentioned by the trade union representative who viewed it as crucial for successfully completing an apprenticeship scheme:

“If an apprentice hasn’t got good parental support they fail because they can’t even get to work” (Union representative).

Furthermore, the plastics manufacturer regarded parental support as vital to apprenticeship schemes:

“It is important with apprenticeship schemes that you have a stable, supportive family” (Plastics manufacturer).

This seems to suggest that apprenticeships are only tenable when apprentices have stable family backgrounds and support.

Cheap labour and the link to exploitation

Another common theme that occurred was that apprentices perceived their low pay to be exploitative. Three out of the four apprentices understood the point that employers can use apprentices as cheap labour, although one apprentice rejected the statement and another alluded to mitigating circumstances. However, the sales representative was vehement on this topic:

“To me it felt as if I’d been conned into doing cheap labour” (Apprentice 1, sales).

It may be that the sales position is less about training and education ending into a national recognised qualification such as electrical apprentices have. Even the higher paid apprentice highlighted the need to work for a more reputable company’s apprenticeship scheme to avoid this situation. But the other two apprentices offset low pay with learning key technical skills.

The employers rejected the notion of employing apprentices as cheap labour outright:

“It’s investing into people who are key to our future... we are teaching them the skills they need to be successful in our company” (Insurance employer).

The other employer commented further:

“There has to be an element of a cost incentive for apprentices or businesses would simply not take on apprentices... apprenticeships allow us to pass on the skills of our existing staff onto our future workforce” (Manufacturing employer).

Here the employers seem to be arguing that apprenticeships are an investment in their organisation’s future.

National Minimum Wage compliance

An additional finding was that two of the four apprentices were being paid below their legal entitled apprentice minimum wage rate, which is disturbing when taking into account the low level of pay on offer. However, one apprentice was being paid significantly above his entitled legal apprentice minimum wage rate. This is made clear in the below table. Interestingly, it is the sales apprentice, who unlike the hairdresser who feels she is learning important skills, that receives the least which may support the view of feeling exploited.

Table 1: Apprentice pay

Apprentice	Hourly Entitled Wage Rate (First Year)*	Hourly Actual Wage Rate (First Year)	Hourly Over/Under Payment Amount
Apprentice 1 (Sales)	£2.68	£2.54	-£0.14
Apprentice 2 (Insurance)	£2.65	£7.21	£4.56
Apprentice 3 (Manufacturing)	£2.68	£2.68	£0.00
Apprentice 4 (Hairdressing)	£2.68	£2.60	-£0.08

*Entitled wage rate dependent on year apprenticeship commenced as apprenticeship minimum wage rate fluctuates (GOV.UK, 2014).

Relative importance of pay to training

A key final theme identified from the data were the differing views of the apprentices in how important they regarded their actual pay in comparison to training and career development. There were mixed views from the apprentices who identified the importance of both:

*“Pay is important but... I have to look at the future and focus on my training”
(Apprentice 4, Hairdressing).*

While the commuting apprentice considers that:

“Pay probably edges it, although... the main reason I joined this company was that I was looking for a career” (Apprentice 2, Insurance).

The next apprentice raises an important point about apprenticeship schemes, that they offer an educational route that is paid compared to university education for which student have to pay £9,000 a year for:

“...it was an alternative to going to University where I wouldn’t be getting paid either and so the skills were the most important” (Apprentice 3, Manufacturing).

However, their employer picks up on this comparison:

“These people are learning new skills and qualifications for nothing” (Manufacturing employer).

This perspective is more worrying as it seems to indicate that training is seen more as cost to employer than an investment outlined above. While for the insurance company ‘attractive wages’ to encourage retention of their apprentices long-term.

Discussion

Low apprenticeship wage

The findings suggested that the apprentices viewed apprentice pay as too low and insufficient for their needs. A similar view is reflected in apprenticeship literature. A government report conducted by Behling and Speckesser (2013) identified that apprenticeship schemes wages are likely to be perceived as low. They state this is a result of 56 per cent of apprenticeship schemes being in so-called low pay sectors, which are characterised by low wages and limited career development opportunities. Fuller and Unwin (2011) go further to state that many apprentices, especially women, are being left in a financially disadvantaged positions as a direct result of low apprentice wages. Additionally, Gospel (1998) found that the low levels of apprentice pay have generated negative experiences for many apprentices who struggle to pay their living expenses, which has in turn added negative connotations to apprenticeship schemes. A recent NUS (2015) report criticised apprentice pay as being pitifully low and branded apprentice pay rates as exploitative, stating it did not cover the basic living expenses of apprentices. Cooper (2003) takes this further stating apprentices are living on poverty pay, while Walford (1988) found that apprentices considered their work to be slave labour, branding it a waste of time for the low wage they received in return. Walford (1988), however, rejects the comparison to slave labour due to the existence of monetary payment. These views were not generally supported in this study.

There is a counter argument as the MP and plastics manufacturer highlighted - the cost of hiring apprentices can be used as a justification for a lower wage. Torpey (2013) identifies this adding that apprenticeship wages are initially low to cover the high training costs. Similarly Behling and Speckesser (2013) state that apprentices low starting wage reflect the extent to the costs of training. The apprentices in Walford's study (1988) expressed that their low level of pay was not enough to cover their travel expenses, a point also raised in this study. The NUS (2015) report also reveals that apprentices cannot afford to travel to their workplaces and identifies this as a long-running issue.

Cheap labour exploitation

Our four apprentices considered that the low levels of pay left apprenticeship schemes open to exploitation in the form of cheap labour. Fuller and Unwin (2009) and Walford (1988) argue that some employers view apprenticeship schemes as an opportunity to bring school leavers in as cheap labour. Ryan (2012) points out that not all apprenticeships involve great learning opportunities. This practice can create a revolving door of apprentices destined to leave before completing their apprenticeship, which may be the case with our sales apprentice with his negative experiences. However, not all of the apprentices claimed that their employer was using them as cheap labour. This is supported by Faragher (2014) who states this is the last thing businesses would consider as the apprentices are key to the long-term development of the business, a point both employers stressed. Continuing this view, Greenhalgh (2012) believes that by exploiting apprentices everyone, all stakeholders lose out, as an apprentice will not be

motivated if they think they are being used as cheap labour or 'conned' as the sales apprentice stated.

The organisations clearly rejected claims of exploitation. The investment and substitution strategy by Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner (2008) states that businesses following an investment strategy view apprentices as human capital representing the future of their organisation. Both employers recognised their apprentices as important to the future of their respective organisations. However, in the case of the manufacturing employer there is some overlap with the substitution strategy too, which argues that apprentices can be cheap substitutes for low skilled workers in order to lower unit costs. The manufacturing employer was aware of the cost element behind employing apprentices and encouraged its apprentices to consider how lower income is offset by training. This suggests that this company is following a mixed strategy, using aspect of both investment and substitution as outlined by Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner (2008).

Relative importance of pay

The apprenticeship literature acknowledges that although pay is important to apprentices they have an equal if not higher interest in training and the completion of their apprenticeship (Karmel and Mlotkowski 2010). Walker et al. (2012), too, found clear unwritten expectations from both the apprentice and employer in the employment relationship. The mixed responses to the importance of pay was shared by both the apprentices and employers in this study. The concept of the psychological contract explains training and development as being integral to the apprentices' unwritten psychological contract in offsetting lower pay. Debate on the psychological contract from the employer's perspective has been scarce (Walker et al., 2012). However, the insurance employer acknowledges that by treating their apprentices fairly the company will be rewarded by the loyalty of the apprentices, whilst the manufacturing employer considers that the apprentices will be satisfied due to the training and development the company provides, thus indicating that aspects of the psychological contract are considered by employers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that current apprentices generally perceive their level of pay to be insufficient, the same view is also shared by the policy-maker and trade union representative. In addition, while pay is not the only important factor to apprentices, it is hugely influential to their levels of satisfaction. More worrying is the low level of apprenticeship pay has encouraged some businesses to exploit apprentices as a source of cheap labour. This exploitation indicates a need for more research in apprenticeships, especially in areas such as sales which need to be further explored.

There is evidence that apprenticeships can be both opportunities as they were for three apprentices, as well as exploitative as for one. It is also evident that the apprentices' evaluation is linked to the psychological contract and how the expectations of training and development are met. The apprentices were also well aware that low pay could contribute to exploitation and make travel and living costs difficult to meet. There also needs to be a recognition of the extent of financial dependency on parents and guardians in being able to pursue an apprenticeship scheme (NUS, 2015). This is a point that needs to be considered politically as there is an assumption that all young people have access to this support which is not always the case, and that young people from more challenging home environment will self-select themselves out of consideration and find themselves excluded from this type of employment.

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Student essay commentary

This essay was reviewed by two experts in the field. Their comments are provided below.

The essay considered a range of stakeholders' views on modern day apprenticeships. The main line taken was the levels of pay paid to apprentices, especially during a critical first year, are often too low and can lead to a sense of hardship and exploitation.

The essay should be commended on a number of fronts. The following represents the many positive features of the essay.

Generally, the essay is good because there is a clear structure. The abstract for this essay is promising, offering a topical and relevant study into the equality and diversity issues rooted in family background that can be encountered by young apprentices and the barriers that low

national minimum wage rates create for some individuals. The topic is then fully introduced and the problem identified in the introduction, there is a good review of the literature on apprenticeships, the research methodology is set out and discussed, new information is presented, and the essay ends with a discussion and some final conclusions.

The topic chosen represented a contemporary issue, particularly in terms of being related to current high-profile government agendas, concerning jobs for mostly young people who for whatever reason do not, in the first instance, access higher education. Apprenticeships, as implied in the essay, have become a "political football" over the last two decades or so.

The critical approach taken in the essay stands out. The author is quite right to delve under the rhetoric of apprenticeships, often espoused by governments and business organisations.

The essay touches on a range of issues important in a critical assessment of modern apprenticeships. The main issue being pay, but also how apprenticeships are traditionally and in the current day linked very much to a trade off between low pay and skill accumulation, that leads to increased pay and employment market prospects that could last a full working life. The bedrock of such ventures, as quite rightly exposed in the essay, is a stable and supportive family life for the young apprentice. If anything, more could be made of this as modern apprenticeships are widely marketed as being open to people of all ages, i.e. not just people under 25 years of age.

The essay is also good as there is a clear attempt to understand apprenticeships using a range of theoretical concepts, i.e. psychological contracts, investment/substitution views of apprenticeships. Both concepts inform the research undertaken and the findings/discussion eventually presented. Both concepts, however, could have been more tightly and more overtly integrated into the proceedings.

The essay also should be commended for drawing on the views of a wide-range of stakeholders on apprenticeships, i.e. current apprentices, politicians, employers and trade unions. The findings presented made it quite clear that stakeholder views vary considerably and there is limited agreement between stakeholders on pay at a critical stage of apprenticeships.

The conclusions to the essay are sound and summarise very well what was achieved from undertaking such an exercise. What would probably have further strengthened the essay from the onset would have been a chronological summary of prior apprenticeship provision followed by a contemporary analysis of apprenticeship policy and implications to avoid the mixing of current and historical critique of apprenticeship provision. Further strengthening would be a brief consideration of the study limitations, i.e. how the views of the people who informed the findings may not be generalisable to a wider apprenticeship population. The essay would have also benefited from reflecting on where further research linked to this project could be aimed. For example, drawing on the views of a much larger sample, exploring the experiences of individuals, based on a wide-range of ages, nearing the end of their apprenticeships, as well as individuals who have completed an apprenticeship in the past few years. Exploring a range, or

combined range, of identities related to, for example, gender, disability and ethnicity, would almost certainly enrich such studies.