




# A tripartite understanding of experiences of young apprentices: A case study of the London Borough of Hounslow

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## Abstract

In 2019, a decline in apprenticeship starts prompted the London Borough of Hounslow to make an apprenticeship pledge in its Corporate Plan 2019–2024, committing to create 4,000 new apprenticeships and training opportunities to help young people into work. This article investigates experiences of young apprentices in Hounslow before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring the perspectives of two apprentices, two employers and one training provider in a small-scale qualitative study, the authors identify key hindering and supporting factors affecting entry into and sustainability of apprenticeships, and progression towards professional employment. They found that labour market entry was intensely hindered by *competition* (with peers who had better maths and English qualifications, for a small number of apprenticeships) and *organisational barriers* (such as managers with prejudices against young people, stigmatising apprentices and apprenticeships). Supportive factors identified include *personal characteristics* (such as a positive mindset, enabling young people to persevere despite a disadvantaged socioeconomic background and lack of family support, for example) and *supportive relationships* (e.g. mentoring) between apprentices and their training providers or employers.

**Keywords** Workplace learning · Apprenticeship policy · Labour market · Economic development · Youth unemployment · England

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## Résumé

Compréhension tripartite des expériences de jeunes apprentis : étude de cas réalisée dans le quartier londonien de Hounslow – En 2019, un déclin du nombre de nouveaux contrats d'apprentissage a poussé le quartier londonien de Hounslow à prendre un engagement en faveur de l'apprentissage dans son plan 2019–2024 pour les entreprises, dans lequel il s'engageait à créer 4 000 places d'apprentissage et possibilités de formation pour aider les jeunes à entrer dans la vie active. Cet article se penche sur les expériences de jeunes apprentis à Hounslow avant et pendant la pandémie de COVID-19. Les auteurs ont examiné les points de vue de deux apprentis, de deux employeurs et d'un prestataire de formations dans une étude qualitative à petite échelle et ont identifié des facteurs décisifs freinant ou favorisant l'accession aux apprentissages, la viabilité de ces derniers et le parcours des apprentis vers l'emploi. Ils ont constaté que l'entrée sur le marché du travail était fortement freinée par la concurrence (avec des pairs mieux qualifiés en mathématiques et en anglais qui postulaient pour un nombre restreints de place d'apprentissage) et par des obstacles organisationnels (par exemple des managers qui avaient des préjugés à l'égard des jeunes, qui stigmatisaient les apprentis et les apprentissages). Parmi les facteurs favorables qu'ils ont identifiés, notons les traits de caractère personnels (par exemple un état d'esprit positif permettant aux jeunes de persévérer malgré leur milieu socio-économique défavorisé et l'absence de soutien de leur famille) et les relations de soutien (par exemple le mentorat) entre les apprentis et leurs prestataires de formation ou leurs employeurs.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact both in scale and pace on employment worldwide. In the United Kingdom (UK), the fall in employment was estimated in April 2020 to be “at least 1.5 million, equivalent to 5% of all of those in work” (Wilson et al. 2020, p. 1), twice the amount of the fall during the last recession, and fivefold compared to the previous largest quarterly falls at any point since 1971 (ibid.). In the London Borough of Hounslow – the focus of this article –, there was a 165% increase in new unemployment benefit claimants in just one month, between April and May 2020 (London Borough of Hounslow 2020a), 55,600 residents were furloughed, and 37,618 unemployed, representing 21% of the working-age population (London Borough of Hounslow 2020b). The situation for young people in Hounslow reflected that of the national landscape in that young people in Hounslow were affected almost twice as badly as older people due to the economic downturn, with the unemployment rate reaching almost double the rate of the 55–65-year-old group (London Borough of Hounslow 2020b).

Young people are unmistakably the most impacted compared to all other age groups at a national level (Roberts 2022), with almost half of the total fall in employment (46%) being amongst 16–24-year-olds. Young people are more likely to be furloughed and to subsequently lose their job with a rate of 19% for 18–24-year-olds as of September 2020 (Brewer et al. 2020; Roberts 2022). Young people in Hounslow aged 20–24 were shown to have the highest unemployment rates at

15.4%, above the national average of 14.8% (London Borough of Hounslow 2020b). Employment among the young is a global concern with a lack of skills training linked to poverty (Wolf 2011; Mayombe 2021).

Apprenticeships provide a route into work for young people, combining on-the-job training with qualifications to help develop the skills and knowledge to undertake a particular job (Billett 2016; Mayombe 2021; Roberts 2022). In the past, the apprenticeship framework in England, however, has been criticised for ignoring general and civic educational elements, discounting longer-term interests of employees and failing to bring disengaged employers back on board (Fuller and Unwin 2003; Brockmann et al. 2010; Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Roberts 2022). Later policies sought to address some of these criticisms; one example is the apprenticeship levy introduced in 2017, which places the employer at the heart of the apprenticeship reform (Delebarre 2015) and the new modern apprenticeship (Brockmann et al. 2020; Roberts 2022).<sup>1</sup> Alison Fuller and Lorna Unwin (2011) argue that apprenticeships cannot be one-dimensional but should incorporate pedagogical, occupational, locational and social dimensions. In England, *modern apprenticeships* are grouped into qualification levels equating them with formal education, starting with an intermediate (or Level 2) apprenticeship, mainly for 16–18-year-olds.<sup>2</sup> This is followed by an advanced apprenticeship (Level 3, mainly 19–24-year-olds) and higher apprenticeships (Levels 4 and 5, mainly 25+-year-olds) (Fuller et al. 2017). Pre-apprenticeships and young apprenticeships for 14–16-year-olds were abolished in 2009 and 2011, respectively (ibid.). Higher apprenticeships were introduced in 2010, followed by degree apprenticeships (Levels 6 and 7) in 2015 (ibid.).<sup>3</sup> COVID-19-related difficulties have led to a reduction in employers' interest in training apprentices (Cedefop et al. 2022). To address this problem, it is important to identify and understand key hindering and supporting factors affecting apprenticeships, which was the purpose of the small-scale qualitative study we present in this article.

We begin with a literature review, and then provide some background information on the London Borough of Hounslow. The methodology is followed by a detailed presentation and analysis of our findings. The article concludes with a number of recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> The *apprenticeship levy* is a tax paid by employers with a payroll above GBP 3 million. The money goes into a national fund which is then used to help pay for apprenticeship training costs. *Modern apprenticeships* combine studying for a qualification with on-the-job experience, so the apprentice learns and works from the first day of the apprenticeship.

<sup>2</sup> In England, 15–16-year-olds complete their mandatory formal schooling at intermediate level with the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). Core subjects include English and maths, but additional choices also include vocational subjects. GCSEs are equivalent to qualification Level 2. Two additional years of formal schooling lead to completion of upper secondary level with an Advanced Level (A Level) certificate; this is equivalent to qualification Level 3. There is a total of nine qualification levels; for more information, see GovUK (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed information about apprenticeships in England, see UCAS (n.d.) and Powell (2023).

## Literature review

### Understanding the present labour market

Long-term structural shifts in the UK economy from manufacturing to knowledge-intensive business services have altered both sectoral and occupational structures of employment, and consequently altered the breadth and type of employment opportunities for people (Green 2020; Roberts 2022). By 2030, workers will be required to focus more on technological, social and emotional skills, as opposed to physical, manual and basic cognitive skills (ISC 2019). In London, labour market changes are likely to decrease the share of roles requiring no qualifications to less than 3%, whilst simultaneously increasing the proportion of jobs demanding an ordinary or higher-level degree (London Councils 2019). The “polarisation” between low-skilled and high-skilled work results in fewer low- and medium-qualified jobs, but also limits progression from entry-level jobs, and thus poses a particular challenge for young people (London Councils 2019; Roberts 2022). Chun-Chi Lan (2021) reports that long-term training is more vital than short-term recruitment in internships, making apprenticeships still a viable social capital option.

Besides these general labour market trends, the impact of COVID-19 was felt unevenly across different parts of the UK, across age groups and across people of different socioeconomic backgrounds, with sectors such as education, retail, hospitality and construction being the most highly impacted (Cedefop et al. 2022). Furthermore, a COVID-19 survey conducted by the Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards (FISSS 2020) highlighted particular problems with apprenticeships, including a difficulty to (re-)engage furloughed apprentices, and a lack of technological equipment at home. Worryingly, many in the sector are seeing the pipeline run dry.

### Competitive labour market impacts on “youth” employment

The “polarisation” and competitive environment displaces the less educated by favouring more educated workers (Benda et al. 2019), making it harder for young people to find work (Green 2020; Mayombe 2021). Unemployment disproportionately impacts young people, with 10% of 18–24-year-olds in England unemployed compared to an overall rate of 3.8% unemployment (YFF 2020). Luc Benda et al. (2019) suggest that this increases during economic downturns due to a combination of higher- and medium-level educated workers competing for jobs below their educational level, and employers raising education requirements (Roberts 2022). This aligns with Michael Spence’s job market signalling theory (Spence 1973) and Lester Thurow’s job competition theory (Benda et al. 2019).<sup>4</sup> Applicants are formed into

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<sup>4</sup> In a nutshell, Spence’s job-market signalling theory posits that education beats acquired skills as a credential, resulting in higher pay for more educated workers (Spence 1973). Thurow’s job competition model argues that “lacking direct evidence on specific training costs for specific workers, laborers are ranked according to their background characteristics – age, sex, educational attainment, previous skills, and psychological tests” (Thurow 1979, p. 17).

a labour queue, ranked by employers based on the training costs required to perform in a given job (Thurow 1979). These queues are then matched, in the order of jobs requiring highest training requirements, with applicants with the lowest training costs. However, during times of turmoil such as COVID-19, these queues often merge pushing the unskilled further back in the queue (Celani and Singh 2011).

The shift away from low-skills occupations where growth is low, combined with difficulties moving into medium- and high-skilled work has led to the demise of the “youth” labour market (Green 2020; Mayombe 2021; Wolf 2011; Roberts 2022). In England, access to high-quality and secure work that offers progression and value to society is in decline for young people (Brockmann and Laurie 2016; Clarke and D’Arcy 2018; Wolf 2011; Roberts 2022).

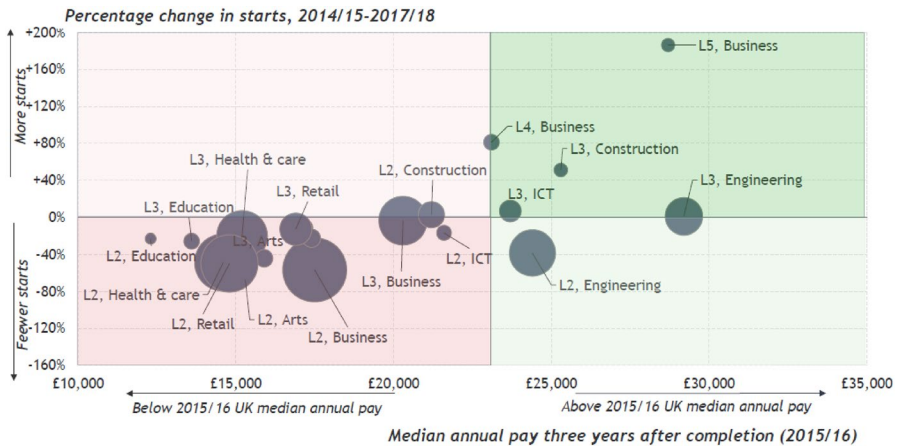
### **Transition to the labour market through apprenticeships: social mobility**

In England, apprenticeships have progressively supported social mobility and capital amongst young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with low qualifications (London Councils 2020a). However, in comparison to other European countries such as Germany, for example, apprenticeships in England conform to the “skills-based model” based on narrow specialisms rather than occupational capacity (Fuller and Unwin 2003; Brockmann et al. 2010; Brockmann and Laurie 2016). Ben Gadsby (2019a) argues that disadvantaged young people account for a disproportionate share of growth in apprenticeship starts. The Social Mobility Commission (Battiston et al. 2020) contends that the earnings gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged learners particularly at intermediate level is reduced by apprenticeships, and the gap even closes with progression to higher levels. The impact of COVID-19 meant that companies were furloughing employees or making staff redundant, off-the-job learning was disrupted, and apprentices, already on low pay, faced additional financial strains (Doherty and Cullinane 2020; Roberts 2022).

### **Apprenticeships: availability**

London Councils (2020a) claim the apprenticeship levy is acting as a barrier, citing a 45% decrease in intermediate apprenticeships nationally since the levy was introduced. Kathleen Henehan (2019) confirms this, but disputes that this shift is due to the levy, highlighting that regulatory reforms have led to the decline of lower quality programmes. Henehan (ibid.) contends that apprenticeships have moved from lower-level programmes, usually with lower pay, to higher-level programmes associated with higher pay, as illustrated in Figure 1.

London has a disproportionately low share of apprenticeship starts (Henehan 2019). The low level of starts, argue London Councils (2020a), is due to factors such as the city’s sectoral composition, a lower supply of Londoners linked to higher progression to higher education, as well as a lower demand from employers. Gadsby (2019a) argues that unlike other regions, disadvantaged young people in London are much less likely to start an apprenticeship. This is not surprising considering there are not many potential “matches” on offer for them here. Henehan reveals that



**Fig. 1** Changes in apprenticeship starts by level, sector and post-apprenticeship pay, England 2014–2018 (Henehan 2019, p. 11).

*Notes* Bubble size represents the share of apprenticeship starts taken up by each type of programme in 2014/15; pay refers to median pay that apprentices who finished their programmes received in 2015/16. Newer programmes, including most at Levels 6 and 7, are excluded from this analysis because there were not enough apprentices completing these programmes in 2012/13 to allow for an analysis of post-apprenticeship earnings. UK median annual pay was GBP 23,084 (nominal) in 2015/16 (ibid.)

“higher-level programmes in better paid sectors (ICT, accounting and business management)” actually “grew more in London than in any other place” in the period 2014/15 to 2017/18 (Henehan 2019, p. 14). This reflects the broader shift to higher-skilled work in the London labour market. How this plays out in Hounslow is presented below, in the “Background” section.

### The challenges and barriers for young people: low qualifications

The Institute for Public Policy Research (Pullen and Dromey 2016) asserts that many of the difficulties young people with low qualifications encounter in their quest to secure work can be attributed to 16–18-year-olds’ phase of education: “Young people who leave full-time education with a level 2 qualification [have a lower employment rate] than those of their peers who leave full-time education with a level 3 qualification or higher education” (ibid.), with 20 percentage points difference between Level 2 and Level 3 learners, and only 39% of Level 2 learners aged 17 progressing into Level 3 (ibid.). There is also evidence of the “cycles” of low qualifications that young people become stuck in, such that a quarter of Level 2 learners aged 17 are at the same level a year later. Furthermore, London Councils (2020a) add that there is a distinct link between the level of educational attainment of young Londoners and their employment outcomes. They observe that a quarter of young people in London do not achieve five GCSEs (i.e. Level 2) by age 18, and almost half are without Level 3 qualifications by age 18 (ibid.).

## The challenges and barriers for young people: circumstances and background

London Councils (2020a, pp. 10–11) point to external socioeconomic factors, asserting the impact of personal circumstances for the learning and progress of young people. They suggest that factors related to disadvantage, in terms of family income and deprivation, influence outcomes for young Londoners. Impetus (2020) point to the young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), referring to a “noticeable difference in NEET rates between young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off peers” (ibid., p. 28). In addition, those who are “doubly disadvantaged”, coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and having low qualifications, are most likely to be NEETs when aged 18–24 (Roberts 2022), the age group featured in our own research sample. Conversely, Solveig Ose and Chris Jensen (2017) found that health and social problems act as barriers to employment for young people, observing that mental health problems amongst young people often disguise social problems. London Councils (2020a) point to inequalities and social exclusion as barriers to employment for young people, citing Gadsby’s (2019b) finding that qualifications can only be attributed to 50% of the overall employment gap for young people. They propose that social exclusion accounts for the remaining gap.

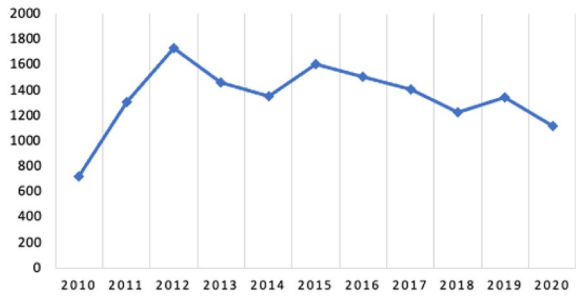
The literature reviewed suggests that there are a range of structural labour market challenges which have a bearing on both the number but also the quality of apprenticeship opportunities open to young people. Whilst a range of barriers relating to individual level factors are highlighted in the literature, these need to be explored in relation to the experiences of young people in apprenticeships. Thus, to enable conclusions to be drawn about how the post-COVID-19 labour market will impact on and inform local authority recovery strategies for youth employment, the collection of primary data is required.

## Background: the London Borough of Hounslow

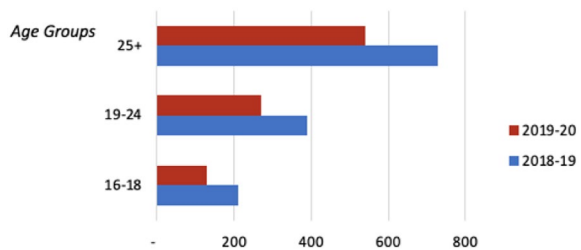
The London Borough of Hounslow stretches from the Western fringes of inner London to the edge of outer London. Qualification levels of young people educated in Hounslow are on par with London, and some indicators fare much better, with 74% Level 2-qualified with maths and English, and 68% Level 3-qualified by age 19 in 2019 (London Councils 2020c). However, London Councils (2020a) suggest that even those who acquire mid-level qualifications are struggling to enter the labour market. The competitive labour market creates a “bumping down” effect, with those with higher qualifications to undertake jobs being shut out. Gadsby (2020) asserts the significance of GCSE maths and English qualifications for outcomes regardless of background. It could be argued that in the context of broadly strong educational performance amongst Hounslow young people, it is the structural issues within the London labour market which may present particularly problematic challenges to overcome in trying to enter the job market (Wolf 2011).

In Hounslow, the number of apprenticeship starts have been largely in decline, even prior to the introduction of the levy in 2017, and after a brief rise in 2019,

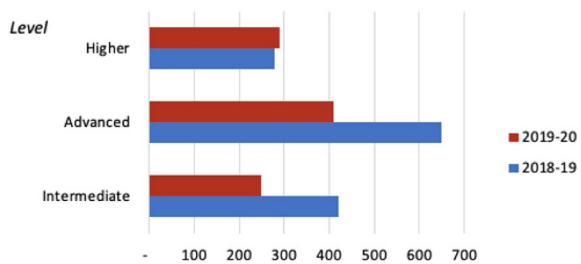
**Fig. 2** Hounslow apprenticeship starts, 2010–2020 (London Councils 2020b)



**Fig. 3** Hounslow apprenticeships by age, 2018–2020 (London Borough of Hounslow 2020c)



**Fig. 4** Hounslow apprenticeship starts by level, 2018–2020 (London Borough of Hounslow 2020c)

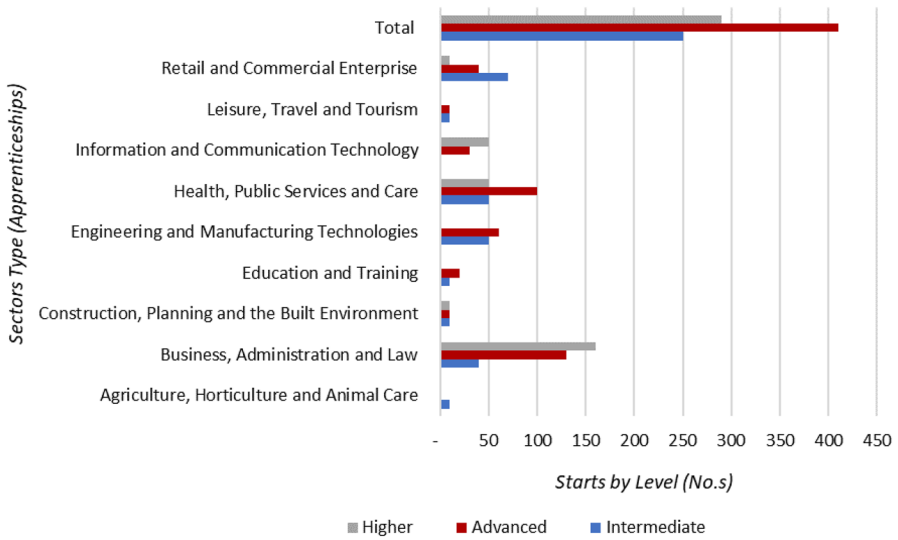


this decline was exacerbated by the pandemic (see Figure 2). This decline is spread across all age groups (16–18, 19–24 and 25+); see Figure 3, and qualification levels (intermediate, advanced and higher); see Figure 4.

The decline in Hounslow apprenticeship starts by level between 2018 and 2020 (shown in Figure 4) suggests that there is a reduced number of opportunities to compete for, but also a barrier to accessing opportunities allowing entry to better-paid work. Gadsby (2019a) argues that while disadvantaged young people with good qualifications are just as likely as their better-off peers to start an apprenticeship, amongst young people without good GCSEs the better-off peers are more likely to start an apprenticeship. Being disadvantaged is not in itself a factor, but the impact of qualifications seems to be of key importance. The Sutton Trust (Fuller et al. 2017) argues that the economically disadvantaged are underrepresented in access to apprenticeships, thus, disadvantaged background does seem to impact the level of apprenticeship undertaken (Gadsby 2019a; Wolf 2011).

The apprenticeship pledge made by the London Borough of Hounslow in its *Corporate Plan 2019–2024* (London Borough of Hounslow 2019) set out a commitment





**Fig. 5** Hounslow apprenticeship starts by sector and levels 2019–20 (London Borough of Hounslow 2020a)

to “create 4,000 new apprenticeships and training opportunities to help young people into work” (ibid., p. 2). Figure 5 shows the number of Hounslow apprenticeship starts by sector and levels 2019–20.

In the year 2020–2021, there was a drop to just 300 apprenticeship starts (ONS 2021; London Borough of Hounslow 2020a). This decline was also seen in national apprenticeship starts, which were reported to have dropped by 45.5% (ONS 2021) between the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and July 2020, compared to the same period in 2018/19 (Roberts 2022). Learners aged 25 were overrepresented in these starts at 61.6%, compared to 54.5% in the previous year, and 46% of London businesses stated they did not intend to fully exploit their apprenticeship levy funding, planning only to use up to half of the funds available in the next 12 months (Rowe and Newbold 2021).

This article aims to understand the barriers young people (18–24-year-olds) in apprenticeships face post-pandemic by exploring the perspectives of the training providers, the employers, and the young apprentices themselves.

## Methodology

The research we present here is centred on understanding the experiences of young people in apprenticeships (18–24-year-olds). Aiming to gain insight and understanding regarding the hindering and supporting factors young people faced in securing apprenticeships before and during the COVID-19 crisis, we employed a small-scale qualitative research strategy. By working with a smaller sample, this strategy facilitated a richer theoretical perspective than large-scale research, enabling us to focus

on contextual circumstances (Saunders et al. 2016), and complement other similar qualitative studies such as those by Fuller and Unwin (2003), Brockmann and Laurie (2016) and Brockmann, Laurie and Smith (2020). Thus, hearing the voices of young people, specifically current apprentices, was crucial, combined with other social actors involved in this process, such as employers and an apprenticeship training provider.

As a limitation, the initial intention of our study was to understand the experiences of young people moving into apprenticeships in two job sectors, IT and healthcare. However, during the data collection period (January 2021–March 2021), the British government implemented an unanticipated COVID-19 national lockdown, not only impacting our research in practical terms, but also adding another factor likely to exacerbate the decline in apprenticeships.

Faced with this situation, we adapted our sampling to include other actors with insight into apprenticeships, namely, employers and apprenticeship training providers. We restricted the age range of apprentices to 18–24 years, in line with the broad definition of youth employment and unemployment from the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2020) and other “young people” research (Wolff et al. 2020). Furthermore, on the basis that the purpose of our study was to understand the experiences of young people entering the labour market via apprenticeships, we included Level 2 or Level 3 apprenticeships as a criterion. This was to restrict the sample to apprentices in entry-level positions, and indeed employers and training providers who recruited, employed or trained this particular group. We selected our interviewees from a group within an organisation one of us already had access to, using homogeneous purposive sampling (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 717), and the organisation confirmed access permission. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study, and confidentiality was assured, removing any identifiable information from transcripts. Details of the sampling and samples can be seen in Table 1.

Since our study was qualitative by design and sought to gather rich and detailed data at an individual level, we selected two apprentices, two employers and one training provider. We developed three interview guides for semi-structured interviews (Bryman and Bell 2015) to capture each participant subgroup’s perspectives on factors hindering or supporting entry of young people into apprenticeships. We chose this approach to accommodate focus, but also flexibility to probe answers, providing a deeper understanding of the meaning participants attributed to phenomena, and thus adding depth to data obtained (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 394). The interviews, which were conducted online, lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were video-recorded for later analysis. Table 2 provides an overview of our interviewees in the order they were interviewed.

We transcribed the audio-visual recordings of the interviews, anonymising all identifying information, and double-checked the result for accuracy by watching and checking against the transcript. Our thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from participant interviews involved identifying and coding themes or patterns occurring across the data set (Saunders et al. 2016). We built up a list of codes starting with “in vivo” terms used by participants themselves during the interviews, and developed additional codes to describe data (ibid.). We continued this process

**Table 1** Sampling and samples

Sample subgroups	Inclusion criteria
Apprentices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aged 18–24</li> <li>• Enrolled in a recognised apprenticeship programme</li> <li>• Employed as an apprentice by an NHS trust or NHS primary care provider*</li> <li>• Undertaking a Level 2 or a Level 3 apprenticeship</li> <li>• Living or working in Hounslow or one of the surrounding boroughs/counties</li> </ul>
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NHS trust or NHS primary care provider organisation</li> <li>• Employing apprentices who were</li> <li>• undertaking Level 2 or Level 3 apprenticeships</li> <li>• and aged 18–24</li> <li>• Organisation located in Hounslow or one of the surrounding boroughs/counties</li> <li>• Staff member role encompasses recruiting and/or supporting apprentices</li> </ul>
Training providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Registered apprenticeship training provider</li> <li>• Commissioned by NHS trusts or NHS primary care providers to deliver apprenticeship training for NHS trusts (health sector) located or working in Hounslow or one of the surrounding boroughs/counties</li> <li>• Recruiting and training apprentices who were</li> <li>• undertaking Level 2 or Level 3 apprenticeships in NHS</li> <li>• and aged 18–24</li> </ul>

\*NHS = National Health Service; NHS trusts = acute (hospital) trusts providing hospital-based NHS services; mental health trusts (offering mental health and social care services); or community trusts (providing services such as district nursing, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy); NHS primary care providers = independent businesses, such as general practitioners' or dentists' practices, or opticians, offering NHS services

**Table 2** Interviewees

Interview order	Participants	Anonymised references
1	Apprentice	A1
2	Training provider	TP
3	Employer	E1
4	Employer	E2
5	Apprentice	A2

by adding new codes, and developing definitions of these. We used a constant comparison approach, in terms of rereading and reviewing earlier transcripts and recordings.

Once we had completed a full list of codes from our data, we reviewed this list to identify relationships and patterns and develop broader themes under which codes could be categorised. We then further refined these to define the themes and relationships between them, establishing main themes and sub-themes (*ibid.*). The final stage of the process involved refining themes further as well as the relationships between them. We then subjected the thematic analysis of each sample subgroup to a comparative analysis, comparing the themes and codes across all thematic analyses. The purpose of this was to identify the degrees of similarity and difference in

different subgroups' perceptions of the factors that hinder or support young people's entry into sustained apprenticeships.

## Findings

In this section, we present our findings in three subsections, beginning with the thematic analysis of the apprentices' perspective. This is followed by thematic analyses of the employers' and the training provider's perspectives, respectively.

### Apprentice thematic analysis

Table 3 summarises the number of references made by the apprentices to each of the themes and sub-themes we identified in our data analysis. These participants identified significantly more supportive factors (57 references) than hindering factors (33 references), with three distinct sub-themes emerging from the analysis: (1) competition within the labour market; (2) personal attitudes and behaviours; and (3) solutions to challenges – supportive relationships to sustain apprenticeships and progress towards professional employment.

#### Theme 1: Competition within the labour market

Among our apprentice interviewees, competition within the labour market had the greatest number of references (20 out of 33) as a hindering factor. Both apprentices described large volumes of unsuccessful applications, with A1 reporting hundreds of applications made and A2 describing spending 6 months following a traineeship searching and applying for apprenticeships. The largest share of references were made by A1 who had applied for apprenticeships during the first 5 months of the COVID-19 pandemic and attributed competition to decreased opportunities available to them as the pandemic impacted the economy and number of vacancies available to them locally. The impact described was that in their attempt to adapt to competitive conditions, candidates had resorted to lowering and broadening their applications for apprenticeships.

“It went from IT Level 4 to the sort of Business general aspects of IT, such as Business Administration Level 3. As time was going, my patience was decreasing, there was that desperate need to at least have something” (A1).

Feedback from employers was described by participants as citing lack of experience or competition as key reasons for unsuccessful applications.

#### Theme 2: Personal attitudes and behaviours

The apprentices identified personal attitudes and behaviours as a key supportive factor, with 35 references alone within the subcategory's seven sub-themes, which included, for example, positive mindset (11 references). They stated that these

**Table 3** Apprentice thematic analysis

Themes and subcategories	Sub-themes	Total no. of references
Hindering factors		33
<i>Individual circumstances</i>		4
	Influence of family and socioeconomic context	3
	Need for financial security	1
<i>Individual level factors</i>		4
	Lack of access to advice on apprenticeships at school	2
	Lack of work experience	2
<i>Local labour market</i>		25
	Competition for vacancies	20
	Lengthy NHS recruitment process	1
	Shortage of available opportunities	4
Supportive factors		57
<i>Individual background</i>		12
	Cultural values and expectations	6
	Family support and influence	5
	Peer support and influence	1
<i>Individual level factors</i>		10
	Access to careers advice on apprenticeships (school)	2
	Achievement of maths and English GCSEs	5
	Experience of work and skills development through volunteering, placements and networking	3
<i>Personal attitudes and behaviours</i>		35
	Having personal goals to cope with uncertainty	1
	Overcoming prior challenges	4
	Personal drive	2
	Positive mindset	11
	Resilience	5
	Self-belief	3
	Self-motivation and purpose	9
Solutions to challenges		8
	Creating awareness of opportunities through role models	3
	Building supportive relationships to sustain apprenticeships and foster progress towards professional employment	5

characteristics helped them to mitigate challenges on their journey to becoming an apprentice. They described how prior challenges and adversity had led to their development of resilience, self-motivation, self-belief and a positive mindset. Their experience is helpful towards a deeper understanding of what apprentices experience, and it resonates with other reports such as the one prepared by Kristin Wolff

et al. (2020). For A1, this experience included overcoming a speech impediment, whilst A2 cited growing up in adverse socioeconomic conditions, including lack of parental support and leaving home at the age of 15.

“It wasn’t like my family was encouraging me ... I’m going to apply for this apprenticeship ... why would you do that? ... because I want to succeed, and I want to have nice things in life and own my own property and do these things that people in my family haven’t achieved before ... I learnt the enthusiasm and I learned the drive because no one ever showed me I had to go out and find it really” (A2).

### **Theme 3: Solutions to challenges – supportive relationships to sustain apprenticeships and progress towards professional employment**

Supportive relationships with employers and providers helping apprentices to sustain their apprenticeship and to progress towards professional employment kept emerging from participant A2 as a significant factor, despite being outside the initial focus of our interviews and our study. Describing the impact of this factor, A2 stated, “So, for me it was finding people that believed in me. Which ... in the main is hard to come by, but it was really nice”. Having progressed from a Level 2 into a Level 3 apprenticeship, participant A2 perceived supportive relationships to be an important factor in guiding young people into apprenticeships.

### **Employer thematic analysis**

Table 4 summarises the number of references made by the employers to each of the themes and sub-themes we identified in our data analysis. The three distinct sub-themes emerging from the employers’ responses are: (1) organisational barriers to creating entry-level opportunities; (2) the influence of stigma; and (3) skills and attributes of young people – maths and English qualifications to enter and sustain apprenticeships and progress towards professional employment.

### **Theme 1: Organisational barriers to creating entry-level opportunities**

For our employer interviewees, the creation of apprenticeship opportunities was a key challenge linked to the lack of demand from managers, rather than supply issues. They described this issue in relation to three interlinked subcategories: funding, influence and workforce strategy.

“They haven’t got money to throw around and they are price salary conscious ... Identifying a role is one thing, agreeing to recruit to it is another, OK, and so there is an issue ... They could do with many more people to do the service, but they can’t afford it so that it’s a juggling act ...” (E2).

Influencing managers to create roles was described as problematic. This was not only due to the geographical and structural difficulties in developing influencing

**Table 4** Employer thematic analysis

Themes and subcategories	Sub-themes	Total no. of references
Organisational barriers in creating entry-level opportunities		17
<i>Funding model</i>	Funding salaries on tight budgets a hurdle to driving demand from services	5
	Inflexibility of levy funding for wages compared to previous funding model	4
<i>Influencing service managers</i>	Demonstrating added value for services with no prior engagement	1
	Structural and geographical challenges of messaging	3
<i>Workforce strategy</i>	Decentralised model resulting in variability of engagement	2
	Disconnect with levy use	1
	Focus on upskilling	1
	Lack of demand from services	1
	Senior leadership commitment to drive strategy	3
Skills and attributes of young people	Maths and English skills to enter and sustain apprenticeships and foster progress into professional employment	19
	Socialisation skills to present self and cope with challenges	13
Influence of stigma	Credibility of higher-level apprenticeships amongst applicants	6
	Manager perceptions of apprenticeships	11
	Manager stereotypes of young people	1
	Sectorial value of work-based learning	4
	Socioeconomic background and perceptions of apprenticeships	1
		4

Table 4 (continued)

Themes and subcategories	Sub-themes	Total no. of references
Market conditions		
	Competition displacing less able applicants	4
	Lack of demand from managers to meet potential supply	2
Recruitment process		
	Bureaucratic process, creating barriers for young people	2
	Unrealistic employer expectations for entry roles	3
Solutions to overcome challenges		
	Education system change	1
	Embedding workforce strategy encompassing apprentices	3
	Establishing support structure to sustain and progress is key	9
	First refusal on entry-level roles for apprenticeships	1
	Levy subsidising apprentice wages to drive demand	3
	Using success stories to influence managers	2



relationships, but also attributed to pre-levy salary funding initiatives providing an additional hurdle to establish value for services.

“I’ve got to demonstrate that added value more, but how do you demonstrate the added value if you can’t get them in to have the person in the first-place kind of place” (E1).

These conditions were described as hindering the creation of opportunities, both in terms of the financial investment required, which discourages the use of the levy, but also more broadly in terms of the lack of a centralised workforce strategy driving a corporate commitment and strategy for apprenticeships.

“I’ve got places in in different services where things could be thriving, and like I could demonstrate we’ve got a lot of apprenticeships, but then in other areas they might not have anything. But in general, workforce planning isn’t that it’s very much bespoke to each service and they are responsible for their own sort of plans and actions” (E1).

## **Theme 2: Influence of stigma**

Another significant theme emerging from our interviews with employers was the stigma attached to apprenticeships by managers. Participants described this stigma as relating to credibility, influencing demand in terms of the creation of opportunities:

“[there] is a bit of a stigma about apprenticeship. Still, I think if they’d been called something different, maybe like, I don’t know, work-based learning qualifications or something. I think by having the old apprenticeship tag when they’re very different to how they used to be. Yeah, I think that might have given them a different credibility” (E1).

## **Theme 3: Skills and attributes of young people – maths and English qualifications to enter and sustain apprenticeships and progress towards professional employment**

Finally, our employer interviewees described the lack of maths and English qualifications at Level 2 as impacting sustainability of apprenticeships and a barrier to progressing into higher-level payrolls.

“The barrier around qualifications is, I think sometimes it’s around and honestly not set someone up to fail. ... so is it fair to say come and join us will get you through, if actually they haven’t got some of the foundation skills that they’re going to need. So, whether the qualification for the individual is truly a barrier or not, depends on the approach” (E2).

## Training provider thematic analysis

Table 5 summarises the number of references made by the training provider to each of the themes and sub-themes we identified in our data analysis. The three distinct sub-themes emerging from this analysis are: (1) Organisational barriers to creating entry-level opportunities; (2) stigma; and (3) solution to challenges – developing support infrastructure to enable sustainability and progress.

### Theme 1: Organisational barriers to creating entry-level opportunities

The training provider identified a lack of apprenticeship opportunities for new entrants as a key issue, stemming from challenges related to funding, influence, and workforce strategy. National funding initiatives focusing on recruitment were described as often displaced levy funding, creating jobs instead of apprenticeships and thus impacting the number of available apprenticeship opportunities.

“... it’s not that we’ve necessarily experienced a shortage of applicants, it’s a shortage of positions to shortage of apprenticeship roles ... focusing on health-care, there’s often a conflict, so there’s often other initiatives going on to get workers ... that will bypass the apprenticeships route” (TP).

Notably, significant emphasis was on influence and the pivotal role of the apprenticeship lead influencing perceptions and the adoption of apprenticeships by managers, with the largest number of references across all sub-themes:

“often you’re interacting with decision-makers that are in these apprenticeship lead roles, so to speak, who have no experience of apprenticeships ... again, we can talk about stereotyping, they may have a particular view, and ultimately decide how apprenticeships is [*sic*] sold within that organisation. However, this will often depend on the outlook of that individual and how they’re selling it to their peers and colleagues” (TP).

Influencing manager decisions was described as correlating to support infrastructures for apprentices, acting as a significant barrier to influencing managers’ decisions to create opportunities.

“You know and then if the infrastructure isn’t there to support them, and essentially that apprentice has a bad experience and leaves prematurely, that manager’s going to have a dim view on apprentices. So, the apprentice is dissatisfied and this creates a vicious circle” (TP).

The training provider reported that apprenticeships were often viewed by employers as a workforce strategy to upskill substantive staff opposed to new entrants into a sector, again influenced by the apprenticeship lead.

**Table 5** Training provider thematic analysis

Themes and subcategories	Sub-themes	Total no. of references
Organisational barriers to creating entry-level opportunities		18
<i>Funding</i>	Conflicting funding initiatives favour employment over apprenticeships	4
	Procurement bureaucracy impedes speed of process	1
		3
<i>Influence</i>		11
	Critical influence of the apprenticeship lead on apprenticeship strategy	6
	Lack of support infrastructure creates vicious circle for managers	2
	Lack of understanding of added value new apprentices bring to organisation	3
<i>Workforce strategy</i>		3
	Focus on upskilling strategy for incumbent staff	1
	Lack of demand from services to meet supply of potential applicants	2
Skills and attributes of young people		6
	Maths and English qualifications key to sustain apprenticeships and foster progress towards professional employment	5
	Presenting employability attributes and behaviours	1
Stigma		13
	Calibre of applicants for apprenticeships versus jobs	5
	Manager perceptions of young people	3
	Manager perceptions of value of apprentices and apprenticeships	5
Solutions to challenges		5
	Developing support infrastructure to enable sustainability and progress	3
	Educating managers on added value of new apprentices	1
	Implementing apprenticeship first refusal model for all new entry-level posts	1

## Theme 2: Stigma

Another significant theme emerging from our interview with the training provider was the stigma attached to apprenticeships (13 references), with our respondent identifying this as being associated with the negative stereotyping of young people in society more generally.

“I think it’s the stigma that comes along with the label of an apprentice. Again, people potentially view that as it’s a perhaps a younger person, potentially unemployed, fresh out of school, very few qualifications to their name. It’s just you know, it’s an impression people create, which isn’t a true reflection of the calibre of people that would apply for apprenticeships” (TP).

Negative stereotypes and an outdated understanding of apprenticeships more broadly were thus perceived as permeating into decisions about levy use and creation of entry-level apprenticeships:

“if you could just get rid of that stigma ... associated [with] apprenticeships, particularly with older workforce. You know, that plays such a big part in ... how, say, the levy is utilised and whether you see it sort of more ring-fenced for higher level apprenticeships for substantive staff, or whether actually using it in the right way and bringing in new blood into the organisation” (TP).

## Theme 3: Solution to challenges – developing support infrastructure to enable sustainability and progress

Finally, our training provider interviewee described a lack of support as a significant barrier for sustainability, underlining the broader issue of entry to sustainable apprenticeships.

“My experience of working ... bringing in candidates at entry level is that when they’ve done it, it’s been done poorly. So, they’re not necessarily getting, when they’re in the apprenticeship [apprentices], the support they need, so they often end up being leavers, so they won’t complete apprenticeships” (TP).

## Comparative thematic analysis: differences in themes

Comparing the key themes emerging from all of our interviews with apprentices, employers and the training provider, we find that “individual circumstances” was the only theme identified solely by apprentices as a supportive factor (Table 6). It is conceivable that employers’ and training providers’ awareness of young people’s individual circumstances such as socioeconomic background and family support is likely to be very limited at apprenticeship application stage and thus may account for such a degree of difference. Another striking phenomenon shown in Table 6 is that individual level factor themes (lack of advice on

**Table 6** Comparative thematic analysis (all themes)

Themes	No. of references			
	Apprentices	Employers	Training provider	Total no. of references
<b>Individual circumstances</b>	<b>16</b>			<b>16</b>
<i>hindering</i>	4			4
<i>supportive</i>	12			12
<b>Individual level factors</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>72</b>
<i>hindering</i>	4	19	6	29
<i>supportive</i>	43			43
<b>Local labour market</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>7</b>		<b>32</b>
<i>hindering</i>	25	7		32
<i>supportive</i>				
<b>Organisational barriers in creating entry-level opportunities</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>38</b>
<i>hindering</i>		19	19	38
<i>supportive</i>				
<b>Influence of stigma</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>24</b>
<i>hindering</i>		11	13	24
<i>supportive</i>				
<b>Solutions to challenges</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>32</b>
<i>hindering</i>				
<i>supportive</i>	8	19	5	32

Key Response ranges

1–10	11–20	21–30	31–40	41–50	71–80
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apprenticeships at school, lack of work experience) emerge as important within the analysis, scoring almost double the number of references recorded for all other themes (72 references; of which 47 were made by the apprentices).

The degree of difference in perceptions of individual level factors is shown in Table 7, with apprentices overwhelmingly identifying factors as supportive (43 references), whilst employers and training provider identified individual factors as solely a hindering factor (19 and 6 references, respectively). Notably, the diverging perceptions in individual level factors can be attributed to apprentices identifying personal attitudes and behaviours as positive characteristics needed to navigate the process of securing an apprenticeship. It is conceivable that apprentices were more likely to reflect on their personal attributes and the role of these in their personal journeys. Furthermore, Table 7 shows sub-themes that were mentioned by only one participant subgroup.

The degree of difference between perceptions of apprentices compared to those of employers and training providers highlights that each group of participants were more likely to identify factors from their frame of knowledge and perspective. Thus, apprentices identified more individual level factors and fewer organisational factors than employers and the training provider.

**Table 7** Comparative thematic analysis (individual factors)

Themes	Sub-themes	No. of references			
		Apprentices	Employers	Training provider	Total no. of references
<b>Individual level factors</b>		<b>47</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Hindering</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>29</b>
	Lack of access to advice on apprenticeships at school	2			
	Lack of work experience	2			
	Maths and English skills to enter and progress		13	5	
	Socialisation skills to present self and cope with challenges		6	1	
<b>Supportive</b>		<b>43</b>			<b>43</b>
	Experience of work and skills development through volunteering, placements and networking	3			
Personal attitudes and behaviours		35			
	Having personal goals to cope with uncertainty	1			
	Overcoming prior challenges	4			
	Personal drive	2			
	Positive mindset	11			
	Resilience	5			
	Self-belief	3			
	Self-motivation and purpose	9			
Skills and attributes of young people		5			
	Maths and English skills to enter and sustain apprenticeships, and foster progress towards professional employment	5			

Key response between

1–10	11–20	21–30	31–40	41–50	71–80
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## Comparative thematic analysis: similarities in themes

Table 8 shows the similarities in themes we found by way of comparative thematic analysis. Maths and English qualifications at Level 2 emerged as a key *individual level factor* across all participant groups. Whilst apprentices identified this factor as being significant for entering an apprenticeship, employers and training providers placed importance on these qualifications for young people to sustain an apprenticeship and progress beyond it into professional employment. In the *local labour market* thematic category, competition was a factor identified by apprentices and employers, but the latter highlighted the context of this as displacement of less able candidates, likely an insight garnered from a recruiting perspective as an employer. The only consistent factor across all three groups of interviewees was the creation of a support structure in the thematic category of *solutions to challenges* to help sustain apprenticeships and guide apprentices into professional employment.

## Discussion

To understand what stands in the way of young people's entry into an apprenticeship and what makes it easier, it is instructive to identify the hindering and the supportive factors (Brockmann et al. 2020; Roberts 2022). Within our analysis of the responses from the apprentice subgroup, the factors emerging as overarching themes were related to individual epistemologies and demographics. Our findings suggest that there are *structural barriers* (such as competition and a bureaucratic application process) and *organisational barriers* (such as funding, managers' prejudices, etc.) which serve to limit access to opportunities. We also found, however, that *individual level factors*, such as young people's (lack of) personal capabilities and (lack or low level of) maths and English qualifications, can also hinder young people's entry into apprenticeships (Roberts 2022). These deeper insights into their experiences are helpful in understanding and addressing the challenges young candidates hoping to enter an apprenticeship are struggling to overcome.

### Competition in the labour market

Competition may be an entry barrier to apprenticeships for young people, in part linked to displacement by more able applicants (Roberts 2022). Employer participants in our study did identify competition as a factor linked to more able applicants and demand issues, of which the latter is elaborated on in the organisational barriers section below. "Polarisation", discussed by Anne Green (2020) and Luc Benda et al. (2019), displaces apprentices in competitive contexts, confirming Spence's signalling theory and Thurow's job competition theory (Benda et al. 2019) in relation to the signals of apprentices being weaker in the context of wider competition in the labour market, thus disadvantaging them (Roberts 2022). Following completion of an IT Level 3 qualification, participant A1 initially sought a Level 4 IT higher

**Table 8** Comparative thematic analysis (similarities)

Themes	Theme subcategories	Sub-themes		
		Apprentices	Employers	Training provider
<b>Individual level factors</b>	Skills and attributes of young people	Maths and English for entry into apprenticeships	Maths and English for entry into apprenticeships	
			Maths and English for sustaining apprenticeships	Maths and English for sustaining apprenticeships
			Maths and English for progression	Maths and English for progression
			Socialisation skills	Socialisation skills
<b>Local labour market</b>		Competition	Competition displacing less able candidates	
		Bureaucratic application process	Bureaucratic application process	
		Lack of opportunities	Lack of opportunities	
<b>Organisational barriers in creating entry-level opportunities</b>	Funding model		Funding salaries	Conflicting funding initiatives
	Influencing managers		Influencing managers	Influence of apprenticeship lead
	Workforce strategy		Lack of demand from services	Lack of demand from services
			Upskilling staff	Upskilling staff
<b>Influence of stigma</b>			Apprentices	Apprentices
			Apprenticeships	Apprenticeships
			Young people	Young people
<b>Solutions to challenges</b>		Support structure to sustain apprenticeships and foster progress towards professional employment	Support structure to sustain apprenticeships and foster progress towards professional employment	Support structure to sustain apprenticeships and foster progress towards professional employment
			First refusal on entry-level roles	First refusal on entry-level roles
			Using success stories to influence managers	Using success stories to influence managers

Key:

Consistent	Some degree of similarity
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apprenticeship to pursue a career pathway in IT, but ended up in a much broader Level 3 Business Administration apprenticeship. Thus, we can confirm that competition is a significant factor in entry to apprenticeships for young people.

### **Personal attitudes and behaviours**

To navigate the process of applying for and securing an apprenticeship, young people need positive personal characteristics. Apprentices described resilience, self-motivation, self-belief and a positive mindset as personal attitudes and behaviours that enabled them to overcome barriers they faced on their journeys. This aligns with the work-ready capabilities other research found to be supporting young people to enter and sustain work (Wolff et al. 2020). Mindsets impact the cognition, emotions and behaviours of individuals in contexts of achievement (Heslin and Keating 2016). A positive mindset would enable apprentices to regulate these to support achievement of objectives, fostering the central role of individual agency in reaching personal goals (Schoon 2020). Apprentices perceived these characteristics as enabling them to mitigate challenges they faced, including structural barriers such as competition within the labour market, and individual circumstances such as lack of family support and socioeconomic background hindering their progress. This finding contradicts previous research identifying socioeconomic disadvantages as limiting the ability of young people to exercise individual agency (Schoon 2020; Ng-Knight and Schoon 2017).

### **Organisational barriers to creating entry-level opportunities**

Competition is also exacerbated by a lack of available apprenticeships. The creation of entry-level apprenticeships is impeded by organisational challenges, thereby limiting the quantity of opportunities available to young people. Interrelated issues of the apprenticeship levy funding model negatively influencing managers and workforce planning were identified by participants as key issues in terms of restricting use of the levy and consequently the creation of apprenticeship opportunities. This corresponds to a national issue of unspent apprenticeship funds, which Unison, one of the UK's largest trade unions, suggests stands at 79% (Unison 2019, p. 1). Participants mentioned funding of salaries and associated backfill costs for off-the-job-learning as a key obstacle, with lack of flexibility in the levy model to support these costs acting as a further barrier. These factors are related to the issue of the levy funding model negatively impacting availability of entry-level opportunities discussed by London Councils (2020a, pp. 10, 18). Participants established these challenges around workforce planning in relation to degree of influence, taking into consideration lack of funding and resulting lack of demand from services for apprenticeships. Stephen Billett (2016) emphasises the importance of immersion in work communities. In their qualitative studies, Michaela Brockmann et al. (2020) identified minimally invested employers and partially engaged employers as barriers to quality apprenticeship experiences.

## Stigma

Stigma may play a role in determining the decisions made by managers whether or not to both create apprenticeships and recruit young people into them, and thus presents another potential barrier to for young people seeking to enter apprenticeships. Brockmann and Laurie (2016) suggest that research indicates that employers may place low importance on candidates' "technical" knowledge. Our respondents described stigma as a label attached to apprentices and relating to the negative stereotype of young people as "anti-learning" (Brockmann and Laurie 2016, p. 231). This aligns with the definition of stigma provided by Bruce Link and Jo Phelan as co-occurrence of "elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination" in conditions where power is exercised (Link and Phelan 2001, p. 377). Managers exercise power through decisions they make, be it to upskill staff through an apprenticeship or to recruit and train a new staff member through an apprenticeship. Our respondents confirmed that there is a stigma attached to apprenticeships, which Terence Hogarth et al. (2012) suggest relates to being considered as a lower-status pathway into the labour market, while Anna Mazenod identifies the wider system status of apprenticeships as associated with the segmentation between academic and vocational orientations in the education system (Mazenod 2016; Brockmann and Laurie 2016). Lower-quality programmes have declined, as discussed by Henehan (2019) and there has been a shift to higher-level and higher-pay programmes. Despite numerous "think tank" reports seeking to address parity of esteem (VOCEDplus 2016; Cedefop 2011), the negative perceptions, in the UK and beyond, continue to pervade despite policy level changes to improve the quality of the apprenticeship pathway (Gray and Farrell 2021).

## Maths and English qualifications to enter and sustain apprenticeships and foster progress towards professional employment

Maths and English qualifications at Level 2 can act as a supportive factor to enable young people's entry into apprenticeships. However, in accordance with apprenticeship funding rules highlighted by Stephen Evans (2020, p. 45), maths and English ("functional skills") constitute a mandatory requirement for Level 3 apprentices to achieve Level 2 functional skills. The significance of sustainability for young people entering apprenticeships, and the need to achieve the requisite qualifications, can hinder young people's completion of and progression through the apprenticeship pathway, as they may not be academically able. Thus, maths and English qualifications are a factor for entry into sustainable apprenticeships.

## Supportive relationships to sustain apprenticeships and foster progress towards professional employment

Supportive relationships with employers and providers are another important factor in enabling young people to enter apprenticeships which are sustainable and enable

progress. Our respondents underlined the significance of such relationships for the individual epistemologies of young people. Katelyn Herrygers and Stacey Wieland (2017) suggest that early work experience and socialisation shape young people's perspective of work and their self-efficacy, and thus are key to a positive sense of self and work. Billett (2016) lists these personal epistemologies as "knowing, engaging and learning" (*ibid.*, p. 622).

## Conclusion and recommendations

Our findings suggest that structural labour market factors of competition and employer demand are likely to create conditions of limited entry-level opportunities, especially with the added impact of the COVID-19 crisis, whilst individual level factors of positive personal characteristics and maths and English qualifications could act to hinder young people entering apprenticeships. The results of our small-scale qualitative research among apprentices, employers and a training provider in the Borough of Hounslow highlight that sustainable apprenticeships are a major concern, with maths and English qualifications and support during apprenticeships identified as key factors in enabling young people to enter and sustain apprenticeships and progress towards professional employment.

Competition as an existing barrier to young people entering apprenticeships is likely to be exacerbated further in the context of an increased supply of labour due to COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the labour market identified in the literature, for example by the Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards (FISSS 2020) and the Institute for Employment Studies (IES 2021). Enabling young people to improve their labour market position through development of skills, as suggested by Gary Becker's human capital theory (Becker 1964; Benda et al. 2019), will be important to mitigate recent negative impacts. Positive personal characteristics can enable young people to moderate the hindering effect of barriers such as competitive conditions, and as such support young people in building work-ready capabilities as well as job sustainability. Funding mechanisms to target opportunities for young people as discussed by the West London Alliance (WLA 2020) could to some extent counter the impacts of the competitive labour market for young people in Hounslow. Explicitly developing work-ready skills will be a common agenda as revealed by our research among apprentices in the Borough of Hounslow.

Organisational level barriers impact the demand for apprenticeships in terms of restricting the numbers of entry-level opportunities created. As an example, the COVID-19 crisis caused apprenticeship placements to decline in most countries, due to drops in company participation, either temporarily or only in some sectors (Cedefop et al. 2022). In the UK, and among apprentices in the Borough of Hounslow, sector-level challenges in relation to the apprenticeship levy continue to negatively impact both demand and the creation of new entry-level opportunities as a pathway. In the face of the complexity of interrelated issues and the need to understand the specific sector-level factors involved, a focus on growth industries with sustainable high-value jobs is recommended, supporting young people in identifying

and accessing sectors that will allow sustainability of apprenticeships and jobs, and progression into better work.

Stigma remains an underlying factor that can also negatively impact the creation of entry-level apprenticeships, as seen among apprentices in the Borough of Hounslow, and thus restrict the numbers of opportunities available to young people in the labour market. Continuing negative perceptions of apprentices, apprenticeships and young people pervade among both managers and the wider public, and are based on outdated stereotypes and information. To effect change on this front, it is important to continue raising awareness of the positive impact on companies and communities of young people as apprentices, and further addressing quality and credibility concerns of apprenticeships will remain important factors in improving the situation (OECD 2021; Cedefop 2022).

Our findings provide a deeper understanding of young people's experiences in the Borough of Hounslow in terms of the skills and support they need to enter and sustain apprenticeships, and progress towards professional employment. In this context, maths and English qualifications and supportive relationships with employers and training providers have been identified as key factors.

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