

The apprentices' journey



Stories of nominees for the Adult Apprentice of the Year Award, Adult Learners' Week 2011

**Adult
Learners'
Week**
learn for life

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“If it wasn’t for my apprenticeship I would still be stuck in a rut with no direction to walk in. Now I have this qualification I feel a new person with limitless possibilities and it has given me back the drive to learn to further myself in my career. I owe my whole career down to one qualification – thank you!”

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21 De Montfort Street
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1. Introduction

This report investigates the experiences of adult apprentices who were nominated for the Adult Apprentice of the Year Award as part of Adult Learners' Week 2011. Adult Learners' Week is the annual celebration of adult learning organised by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and is supported by the European Social Fund, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and a number of other organisations and agencies. Adults are defined as being 19 years of age or more. 2011 was the first year of the Adult Apprentice of the Year Award sponsored by Pearson.

The experiences of the adults nominated for the Apprentice of the Year are an unusual source of information which might assist further policy thinking on adult apprenticeships. This report focuses on how the nominees learnt about apprenticeships, how they got onto their apprenticeship, and how they were supported once on the apprenticeship. It also reflects their views on how adult apprenticeships might be improved.

The report analyses the 81 nominations for the 2011 Adult Apprentice of the Year by gender, age at starting the apprenticeship, the trade/occupation of the apprenticeship, and relevant comments made as part of the

nomination. It is supported by a number of in depth phone interviews with 18 of these nominations randomly selected.

The findings are necessarily indicative. The survey group of 81 nominees is not a statistically representative sample of the 162,900 apprentices aged over 19. However, the learning journeys of these 81 are important illustrations of the efficacy of aspects of current public policy, and there are some interesting pointers for improved promotion and marketing. NIACE hopes that this report might assist policy development and the wider uptake and successful conclusion of adult apprenticeships.

2. Headline findings

- Apprentices who had been out of work looked on the apprenticeship as a *fresh start*, and as a *challenge* to prove that they weren't failures.
- Older apprentices came from a rich variety of backgrounds, with the single common feature that they wanted to *change their lives*.
- Many reported that the '*work, learn and earn*' model of apprenticeships was particularly attractive.
- The common feature of the nominees' accounts is their immense *pride in their achievements*, with many reporting that the apprenticeship had changed their lives.
- There were moving accounts of how the apprentices' achievements together with their improved self-confidence and self-esteem had transformed their *family lives*.
- There is a general view among the nominees that there is *not enough public* information about apprenticeships.
- Connexions was quoted as sending texts out when apprenticeships became vacant – this is clearly a *modern way of communicating* and engaging the would-be apprentice. Younger people especially liked to use *web-based information and applications*.
- Many of the adults on training courses started an apprenticeship at the suggestion of their *training provider or college*.
- Many of the adults in work started an apprenticeship at the suggestion of *their employer*.
- From the evidence of the nominees, *one-to-one advice and encouragement* from the employer, training provider or college was the principal route into apprenticeship.

- Once the apprenticeship has started, there is strong and in some cases outstanding *learner support* from the employer, college or training provider.
- There were far more nominees from *large employers*, few from medium enterprises, and none from small enterprises.
- A very small number of nominees in work said that the wrong people were being given apprenticeships in the sense that those people were already doing the job – this *may* be a reference to *deadweight*.
- Another small number of people were concerned at the *low level of pay* – this could be off-putting to potential adult apprentices with wider financial commitments, and there was some concern at *job security and progression* at the end of the apprenticeship.

3. Analysis of the survey group

Of the 81 nominees, 47 were women, 34 men.

- Six of the 47 women were in manual trades. Seventeen of the men were in manual trades.
- The profile of people's ages when they started their apprenticeship ranges from 17 to 61 years old. Thirty seven were aged 19–24, thirty were aged 25–65, and of these, 10 were 25–29, eight were 30–39, eight were 40–49, and four were over 50.
- The main non-manual apprenticeships were, in order of take-up, business administration, health and social care, retail, hospitality, early years, and customer services.
- The main manual apprenticeships were, in order of take-up, electro-technical, plumbing, hairdressing, engineering, joinery and automotive.

4. Shared aspects of the learning journeys

Younger people (17–18)

There were only two reports of a school actively promoting apprenticeship, but some nominees had moved into an apprenticeship following their work experience. A more common report was that people had failed at school but were determined to do well at college – hence the importance of the second chance for younger people. Others had made a conscious decision to choose an apprenticeship rather than university, or had not got their grades for university entry, or had chosen to study, work and earn at the same time.

Fresh start for older people

Many of the older nominees had overcome hurdles to get onto their apprenticeship but, once on, had been particularly successful.

Examples of their starting points and learning journeys are:

- ex-homeless;
- a former army deserter determined to come good;
- overcoming personal loss;
- getting to grips with basic skills;
- fighting illness and depression;
- fighting back from alcoholism;
- not being held back by disability;
- to make a career change;
- leaving home and finding the way with difficulty ;
- college was the gateway after a marriage split;

- determined to get on in the man's world of a manual trade;
- foreign qualifications not recognised – climbing the ladder all over again.

Most nominees had overcome personal barriers to undertake their apprenticeship. Whilst their journeys may not be typical, it would probably be useful to see **fresh start** as a feature common to many older people entering apprenticeships.

For those older people (19+) already in work, apprenticeships were often seen as a route to promotion. They were determined to get on, to improve their qualifications, to upskill.

The attraction of an apprenticeship

Learning and earning was very important. Many liked the learning experience itself – “one-to-one tuition”, “outside a formal classroom”, “no distractions from others messing around”, “mature attitude of fellow apprentices”, “it’s job focussed”. One liked the fact that as well as getting a job qualification, she would also get literacy and numeracy qualifications.

One older apprentice commented:

“Most of my fellow apprentices are half my age but they’ve made me feel part of the gang from the word go. Their fresh take on things and zest for life is infectious and inspirational.”

Other apprentices made the following commentes:

“At the college the teachers were more like friends. You were always comfortable and they were always willing to help you. Rather than being told what to do, you can speak to them on a friendly level and so you take more in.”

“College provided me with a new hunger for learning and development I had not had before with other courses or education. I use skills I’ve learnt while taking on board new skills taught by members of staff who have also been in my position.”

“I would recommend apprenticeships to anyone as I have never been made to feel that I am just learning the ropes of the business and from day one have felt like a full-time employee.”

“Doing the apprenticeship has changed my life. I am much more focussed. I am doing a real job in a real workplace gaining the most brilliant experience.”

5. Routes into apprenticeship

There were three main categories of routes into the apprenticeship, each with their own particular features. Firstly, there were people who were not in employment, education or training. Secondly there were people who were in training but not employed. And thirdly there were people who were in employment.

People who were not in employment, education or training

For people not in employment, education or training there were two principal routes into apprenticeship. The first of these was unaided – the person simply saw a job advert and went for it, or alternatively made their own inquiries on the web and submitted an online application (although it is unclear how they knew about the web approach).

“My friends told me about apprenticeship – so I went online, got good information and applied online.”

The second route was assisted – either by a school or 6th-form college giving advice, or by Connexions – either a simple referral,

or a Connexions text message service alerting people to local apprenticeships.

Many of the younger apprentices reported using the internet to search for apprenticeships and to apply for posts on-line.

People in training but not in employment

It is clear from the nominations and from the phone interviews that training providers and colleges of further education play a hugely important role in encouraging adults into apprenticeships. Often the learning journey was from an NVQ course, with a trusted tutor recommending the apprenticeship and actively assisting in finding a placement.

People in work

Many of the nominees in work were actively encouraged by their employer to undertake an apprenticeship. Large employers (presumably with strong human resource development policies) featured prominently in the 81 nominations – e.g. NHS, local

authorities, British Telecom, Babcock International, Superdrug, the Army, Las Iguanas restaurants, and Northumbria Fine Foods. There were very few small or medium enterprises with the notable exception of residential care homes. There were only two mentions of the voluntary sector – both of the YMCA.

6. Information, advice and guidance

Interestingly all the interviewees knew the job they wanted to do. One apprentice reported that his local college had run summer taster sessions where people could try out different jobs and the courses that went with them. Another reported that the employer gave him five taster days for him to confirm that it was what he wanted to do. However, in the phone interviews, some nominees said that there is inadequate public awareness of apprenticeships. Once people were in employment or training, it was their tutors or managers who told them about apprenticeships and encouraged them to get on board. People who were outside the system and who made their own way into apprenticeship often had to struggle on their own to get there. Connexions played an important role in some of these cases.

7. Supporting the learner journey

Given that all the nominations were made by supporting organisations, their exemplary support of the apprentices was hardly surprising.

“The tutor who came from the college was fantastic – the best woman I’ve ever met. She was always available by phone or email.”

“You do get chucked in at the deep end here, but the fact that they’ve believed in you to do that gives you the confidence to have a go.”

“The employer changed my working hours to help, and sent different staff to do activity sessions.”

One nominee reported that his assessor visited him at work rather than having to go into the college – she was *“very supportive and always at the end of the phone and emailing”*.

Another said her employer gave him time off for work/revision – *“My employers have been fantastic.”* Yet

another has a college mentor and tutor – she can email or call either of them if she needs their help or advice – *“Helpful employer. College always available.”* And two others reported: *“Employer gave time off. College was brilliant,”* and *“Employer was brilliant. I even visited my mentor at home for help.”*

Although most nominees reported extensive support from their employer and their college or training organisation, some would have liked more one-to-one, and one would have liked a single booklet which told him everything he would be doing for the whole year.

There was no mention of the role of Union Learning Representatives.

It was local authorities and the police who employed and supported those women nominees who had chosen to go into traditionally male trades such as car maintenance, electrotechnical and plumbing.

8. Retention

Unsurprisingly, the repeated factors determining retention were heightened feelings of confidence, progress and support.

"As time went on I became more confident, my work became better and more lengthy, and it just improved over and over. It just really changed me. It really did."

"I'm enjoying learning. Going back to college has re-kindled the old passion for learning."

"I wanted to prove something to myself. You get a bit more self-esteem and think 'I am somebody'."

"I'm sticking it out because I'm enjoying myself."

At the same time, people wanted the qualification as part of their personal and job progression. Support from employers and colleagues was important too.

9. Progression from the apprenticeship

All of the apprentices nominated were still in the course of their learning journey when the nominations were made, so it was not possible to report on destinations as yet unfulfilled. However what is clear is that the apprenticeship has in almost every case transformed their lives, leaving them confident and ambitious for the future. The words of the apprentices themselves are life affirming. They are loosely categorised as wanting to get on, increased confidence, a fresh start, recovering from ill health, and impact on families. The impact on families is potentially a rich vein waiting to be mined, as it casts a whole new light on the social impact of adult apprenticeships. Overall there is much here that could be used for marketing and promotion of adult apprenticeships.

Wanting to get on

"My job is very rewarding and my life is really much better as I now have the ambition to keep on learning within local government. Maybe one day I'll become a Councillor."

"I went AWOL from the Army. When I was found, I spent six months in military prison. A Warrant Officer gave me a second chance. I want to complete ITQ Level 3 this year. I want to stay in the Army and do my full 22 years. I want to get promoted and to help others in the same way as I was

helped by those who believed in me."

"This is just the beginning and I now want to carry on learning more about the engineering industry and to learn new skills and gain additional qualifications. You only get one chance at life, so I don't intend to waste it."

"Working in the stores [as a woman] gave me the thick skin I needed in a male environment. They get as good as they give! All the other plans in my life have now been set aside as my apprenticeship

is the number one priority. This will open so many doors and will give me the real options when I achieve."

"He represents everything that is great about NVQ / Apprenticeships. With determination and hard work he has achieved a position in the company which he considered to be beyond him. He is the perfect example of what can be done."

Increased confidence

"I started my apprenticeship last April. I don't think I would have come this far if I hadn't been coming to college. The apprenticeship has transformed my life because I am now more outgoing and I know what I want to do with my future."

"On a personal level, my siblings are all academically gifted and I have now found my place among them. I feel that as a middle-aged woman what I have achieved is remarkable. My journey has not finished – it has only just begun."

"If it wasn't for my apprenticeship I would still be stuck in a rut with no direction to walk in. Now I

have this qualification I feel a new person with limitless possibilities and it has given me back the drive to learn to further myself in my career. I owe my whole career down to one qualification – thank you!"

A fresh start

"At school people didn't have any high hopes for me. I am finally proving people wrong and exceeding over their expectations."

"Both my assessor and manager have remarked how dramatic the improvement has been since I started as an apprentice. I never thought I could have achieved this, having left school with no qualifications and unable to read and write properly."

"The apprenticeship has given me a sense of pride and achievement as before I was claiming JobSeekers' Allowance and housing benefits."

Recovering from ill health

"I have a condition called obsessive compulsive disorder. My employer has been exceptional and has supported me throughout. Also my assessor has given me time

and patience to achieve this qualification which gives me the achievement and satisfaction of what I am capable of I know I am."

Impact on families

"Since commencing my apprenticeship I am now much more confident. My home life is also very good. I can buy things for my son. My parents are also happy and proud of my achievements and they feel they have their son back. In fact, life is fantastic!"

"In little short of three years the quality of life for my family has vastly improved and my self-esteem has returned."

"I was lucky enough to be taken on as a supported apprentice scaffolder. I am so sorted now, feeling much more positive about myself and my family are more relaxed around me and are proud of me."

"This will change my family's life because I am now working towards building a career instead of just doing dead-end jobs, so I can provide for my daughter and girlfriend."

10. What could be done to improve adult apprenticeships?

In the phone interviews, the nominees were asked what could be done to improve adult apprenticeships. What follows here is a summary of their ideas – some challenging, all interesting. Many of them focus on the need to improve the promotion of apprenticeships.

Better marketing and involvement

Kerri wanted to see more apprenticeship information events, and to allow apprentices to have their say.

Helen thought that all managers and team leaders should have the information on apprenticeships and pass it on to their employees.

Mathew wanted to see better promotion of the benefits:

“You get experience at the same time as learning, you’re under no pressure to get things right straight away because they know you’re learning, you get paid while you do it, and you get a good qualification under your belt as well as the opportunity to go on to

the next level once you’ve finished.”

Adam wanted better on-line information about apprenticeships, split into areas by trade so that each employer knows exactly where to advertise for an apprentice.

“It’s important that people have just one place to go when they can apply for an apprenticeship and that that place is as specific to their requirements as possible. If there was one central focal point for everyone I think it would be easier.”

Catherine thought there is not enough advertising encouraging older people to get onto apprenticeships.

Steve thinks there needs to be more advertising on the television, radio etc. He didn't know about adult apprenticeships until he turned up at the training provider.

"They are a vast resource of information and advice and this could be an area which could be tapped into to promote apprenticeships. We also need to advertise the funding available for courses not only to individuals but to employers. Many employers don't realise that apprenticeships won't cost them anything but a small amount of time for the apprentice to do the work. They should actively encourage their employees to get to the highest level that is within their grasp and should encourage them to take up these apprenticeships to better themselves."

Steve also thought that the word "apprenticeship" could be changed to something else.

"When you say apprenticeship you automatically think of sixteen year olds learning in a classroom somewhere. If you say that to someone in their 30s for example they might think 'well, I don't really want to do a course with a load of kids'. We could find a word which is more suitable for

adults and distinguishes these types of courses more clearly. Many of the people on these courses are not learning a trade from scratch but may have been doing it for years or want a change in career, in which case they are just building on their existing skills and trying to get a qualification."

Anthony also thought that the term 'apprenticeship' might be off-putting for adults, and thought they could simply be called work based learning.

Saana wanted to see better advertisements and posters.

"They should be talked about more in colleges and workplaces. There should be opportunities of apprenticeships within more companies. A wider range of subjects could be incorporated with the apprenticeship schemes so that they appeal to more people and link in with a wide range of careers. There could be a helpline for those interested in doing apprenticeships and those who need any advice. Leaflets could be issued to employees by companies or trusts who take on apprentices. The benefits of doing an apprenticeship should be emphasised. I feel they should be advertised in news

papers and through job centres as adults are likely to find out about this scheme this way."

Better support

Shane said that there should be more support to get an apprenticeship course in the first place. He thinks that more apprenticeships should be available and these should be better advertised. There should also be more apprenticeships for older people.

"The age range for apprenticeships should be made higher. It's not just young people that can learn. Because apprenticeships will only take on young people I think it's quite discriminating. Colleges could play a more prominent role in promoting apprenticeships."

Gemma thinks colleges focus on their full-time courses when they should give as much emphasis to apprenticeships.

"As it is they have some information on apprenticeships but you are left to your own devices to find an employer."

She thinks they could point you to places where these opportunities are advertised, or develop some kind of online search engine which is exclusively for apprenticeship vacancies.

"They need to sit down and think of some research that they can give to people to help them get apprenticeships, rather than saying 'here's an apprenticeship, you have to go out and find a job to do it with'... If they put that effort in then people might actually go for apprenticeships rather than giving up. College is where people go to look when they want to do something so they need to make sure that the option is there for them to see."

Level of earnings

Daniel raised the issue of pay.

"I found that because of it being an apprentice as an adult it's really hard to live on the pay that companies can get away with, which is why I think adult learners tend to try and avoid because they simply can't live on that little."

Funding

Leanne believes the main way support could be improved is through more and better funding. Funding used not to be an issue as long as you were under 25.

"Now they've changed it it has opened up learning but only for a certain amount of people. This has encouraged people to do work based training but it has a cut off point. I

understand that there's only so much funding to go around but if you can make a case for why someone should do the course and why the course is there the funding should be given. Obviously this can't be done willy nilly but if there's a good enough reason to do the course I think that the funding, or at least part of the funding, should go through."

She doesn't think it's fair that lots of people do irrelevant courses just because they're free; the funding for these should be reallocated elsewhere. She thinks the government should be stricter about who gets funded to do certain courses and uses the example of older workers taking up apprenticeships for jobs they've been doing for years. She believes that these courses are not appropriate for these kinds of individuals, instead they need a higher level course.

Employer involvement

Helen couldn't understand why employers don't take advantage of the funding and courses available to their employees.

"It's important for them to know that it doesn't really cost them in either time or money."

Anthony too thought employers could do more.

"You could save this much money by training an apprentice and that would be your future workforce and encourage sustainability in your business."

He points to his own employer as an example as a third of their workforce will retire next year, and replacing these people with apprentices would be a much cheaper option than employing sub-contractors.

Leanne thinks that more employers need to get involved.

"We need to explain that having an apprentice wouldn't be an expense to them: it doesn't cost the employer anything and it requires minimum time spent away from the job on the part of the apprentice. This is especially important to emphasise if the government really want to get people into work placed training. Employers tend to have incorrect ideas about the commitment apprenticeships require from them in terms of money and time."

Availability of apprenticeships

Apprenticeships need to be made more widely available. Adam didn't start his apprenticeship until he was an older age, and he knows people his age who didn't have his opportunity to start something like this and now they're stuck.

"They feel like they can't get apprenticeships because they're older, but they can't get a job if they can't get training. What's it going to be like for them in the future if they can't get training now?"

He thinks it's important to make apprenticeships more widely available to different age groups because:

"it seems like if you don't get an apprenticeship straight from school you're gonna end up stuck".

He points to the recession and companies tightening their belts as reasons for a lack of adult apprenticeships, and thinks it needs to be explained to them that apprentices don't cost as much as they think in either time or money.

11. How might information, advice and guidance be improved?

In the phone interviews, nominees were also asked how they thought information, advice and guidance on apprenticeships might be improved. Here are some of their thoughts.

Connexions

For Shane, Connexions is also a key source of this info and advice. His local Connexions was closed down last year and he believes that this is a real loss for the young people in his community.

“They offered apprenticeships, they offered jobs, they offered housing support and I think it’s absolutely sick that they have shut them down.”

Role of colleges

Gemma thought more people need to know what an apprenticeship is.

“The college should explain that you can earn while you learn and that the qualification you get at the end of it is the same as what you’d get while working on a full-time course. They should explain

the benefits such as the one-to-one training, the chance to progress, the real life experience in the area that you want to work. They should explain the benefits and how it works and then ask them if it’s for them.”

Progression

Mathew wanted better information about where you can go when you’ve completed the apprenticeship.

Access to information

Both Adam and David thought all the information should be in one easily accessible place so that people who want to do it themselves can. It should inform people of timescales, what the course entails, details of the qualification and what it can be used for.

Similarly, Catherine said more information should be available in libraries or the internet. There could be posters on buses. Adverts could be specifically aimed at adults who might think it's too late to change career and learn something new.

Leanne believes that we definitely need to get information about apprenticeships into schools. People don't always want to do college, so instead advisers could show them apprenticeships:

"If you want to go into work and you want to start earning, why not do an apprenticeship at the same time?"

Leanne used Connexions to get the job she's in now, but it is just as important to get this information into schools.

"There is little knowledge about apprenticeships on the part of parents and they don't see the value of work-based training compared to college. Therefore we need to educate not only the children but their parents on these opportunities."

12. Findings

Given the small sample, these findings are tentative, but many chime with other assessments of adult apprenticeships:

- Apprentices who had been out of work looked on the apprenticeship as a *fresh start*, and as a *challenge* to prove that they weren't failures.
- Older apprentices came from a rich variety of backgrounds, with the single common feature that they wanted to *change their lives*.
- Many reported that the '*work, learn and earn*' model of apprenticeships was particularly attractive.
- The common feature of the nominees' accounts is their immense *pride in their achievements*, with many reporting that the apprenticeship had changed their lives.
- There were moving accounts of how the apprentices' achievements together with their improved self-confidence and self-esteem had transformed their *family lives*.
- There is a general view among the nominees that there is not enough *public information* about apprenticeships.
- Connexions was quoted as sending texts out when apprenticeships became vacant – this is clearly a *modern way of communicating* and engaging the would-be apprentice. Younger people especially liked to use *web-based information and applications*.
- Many of the adults on training courses started an apprenticeship at the suggestion of their *training provider or college*.
- Many of the adults in work started an apprenticeship at the suggestion of their *employer*.
- From the evidence of the nominees, *one-to-one advice and encouragement* from the employer, training provider or college was the principal route into apprenticeship.
- Once the apprenticeship has started, there is strong and in some cases outstanding *learner support* from the employer, college or training provider.
- There were far more nominees from *large employers*, few from medium enterprises, and none from small enterprises.

- A very small number of nominees in work said that the wrong people were being given apprenticeships in the sense that those people were already doing the job – this *may* be a reference to *deadweight*.
- Another small number of people were concerned at the *low level of pay* – this could be off-putting

to potential adult apprentices with wider financial commitments, and there was some concern at *job security* and progression at the end of the apprenticeship.

Finally we note that the quotes from the nominees in this report could be a useful resource in *future marketing* of adult apprenticeships.

Appendix:

Telephone interview prompts

Prompts for phone interviews of people nominated for the Apprentice of the Year Award, Adult Learners Week Awards, 2011

1. How did you find out about apprenticeships?
2. When you wanted more information before starting your apprenticeship, where did you go for it?
3. Did you get all the information and advice you needed before you started your apprenticeship?
4. What do you think could be done to promote adult apprenticeships?
5. What could be done to give people better information and advice about apprenticeships?
6. How does your employer support your apprenticeship?
7. How does your college or training provider support your apprenticeship?
8. How could support for apprentices be improved?
9. If you could do just one thing to improve apprenticeships for adults, what would it be?

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