

Government Supported Apprenticeships in England: A Transitions Regime Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a transitions regime framework to track the development of government supported apprenticeships in England from the 1990s to the 2020s. During this period the apprenticeship programme grew from around 30,000 to 330,000 starts per year. Traditional apprenticeships were targeted at a specific age group who were entering a narrow band of skilled occupations. After three-plus years of training the recipients were intended to be 'skilled for life'. Today's government supported apprentices can be any age, last for any period from six months to four or five years, and at all levels from basic to post-graduate. It is argued that this outcome arises from allowing education and labour markets to distribute government support, and is helping to align England's youth transition regime with the realities of working lives in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: *Apprenticeships, Education, Employment, Training, Transition Regimes, Youth*

INTRODUCTION

England's programme of government supported apprenticeships was launched in 1994. Numbers built up slowly in the 1990s, then accelerated to stabilise at around 330,000 starts annually in the early-2020s. The intention and expectation in 1994 was a reversal of the long-term decline in traditional apprenticeships by spreading the route into service sectors of the economy with mainly non-manual occupations. This is not what has happened. By the 2020s apprenticeships were available at all levels from basic to post-graduate. Starters could be any age. This outcome has not been by government command. It is an outcome from employers exercising their discretion in using government support for training, and the responses of young and older people to these opportunities. The overall outcome is a product of educational and labour markets. It has messages about the shape of working lives in the twenty-first century

A transition regime perspective involves setting apprenticeships and apprentices amid the wider landscapes of how cohorts enter the labour market then progress into their working lives. It involves distinguishing different pathways or routes from

education into work, and if and how apprenticeships are clustered (they are not) or scattered between them. Laying this out forces us to question whether markets have out-performed governments' intentions, and delivered training suited to the economy and working lives in the twenty-first century.

We proceed in Section II with a review of how the concept of transition regime was adopted and used in the 1990s in multi-country European research on young people's journeys from full-time education into working life. Subsequent uses of the concept have included identifying the drivers and processes involved in the post-1970s transformation of transition regimes in specific countries, including the countries of the United Kingdom. Before proceeding we then do some development work on the transition regime concept.

Section III focuses on the government supported apprenticeships that were launched in England in 1994, then developed and expanded to a peak of over half a million starts in 2015-16, then fell back but stabilised with around 330,000 annual starts in the early-2020s. At this point apprenticeships had become the first steps into working life for around a quarter of education leavers. However, the analysis of the programme's impact shows that it has not been a main driver of transformation.

Rather, most apprenticeships have been assimilated into existing pathways and recruitment and training. However, government supported apprenticeships are found responsible for two significant changes. The first, already accomplished, has been to reduce (but not eliminate) precarity in less qualified young people's first steps into employment. The second, with repercussions still to come, has been the formation of a new elite among higher education students and graduates.

Section IV concludes with the messages that emerge from the engagement between England's government supported apprenticeships and the transition regime perspective.

TRANSITION REGIMES

The concept 'transition regime' (or 'system') was adopted by networks of European youth researchers in the 1990s. The metaphor of 'pathways' (or routes) – typical series of steps – had already been used widely in single country studies. 'Regime' became useful only when studying changes over time within countries, and when making inter-country comparisons.

The European Research Network on Transitions in Youth (TiY) was one of many groups that were formed during an expansion of international research in the 1990s. TiY held its first meeting in Barcelona in 1993 and, unlike more fragile networks, it has met annually ever since. The original members of this network were all researching young people's transitions from education to work. They found that these transitions were lengthening in all their countries and were becoming more complicated with the expansion of older and the creation of new courses in upper secondary education and new training schemes. Rising youth unemployment was part of the context in most of the countries. Members from some of the countries that were represented were conducting longitudinal projects, tracking the progress of cohorts from lower secondary education onwards. At TiY meetings they presented their findings. The audience found themselves hearing about institutions, courses and qualifications with unfamiliar titles and no close equivalents in their own countries.

Thus began the search for a typology of transition regimes which would reduce the diversity to a smaller number of types. At that time it was an EU15 about which some harmonised data was available. The outcomes from each country's regime could in theory be measured in levels of civic participation, gender parity, ad infinitum, but in practice interest focused on eventual levels of attainment and unemployment rates. Was there a best practice that could be Europeanised? The achievement that TiY sought to emulate was Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, the search for an equivalent typology of education to work transitions was

unsuccessful. David Raffe who was leading the Scottish School-leavers Survey and a prime mover within TiY's search (Raffe, 2008) announced several years later that the search had been unsuccessful (Raffe, 2014). His advice was that forthwith the transition regime concept should be used primarily in national case studies. This advice is followed in the present paper.

A response by some cross-national research consortia was to resort to Esping-Andersen's typology and use it to compare the experiences of university students (Antonucci, 2016) and during spells of unemployment in different countries (Hammer, 2003). However, the welfare regime typology proved of limited value. State welfare regimes were just one of many influences on young people's journeys from education into work.

A second youth research network also adopted the transition regime concept. This was the European Group for Integrated Youth Research (EGRIS). This group favoured qualitative research which scanned all the interdependent domains of young people's lives – families, peer groups, and housing for example, as well as education and work. (European Group for Integrated Youth Research (EGRIS), 2001). The group conducted a project in 10 countries which focused on small samples of 'vulnerable' young people. The transition regime concept was in this group's mission, but fragmented and disappeared during the conduct of their project (see Walther, 2006, Walther et al, 2005).

With hindsight it is possible to identify earlier errors, due partly to misuses and partly to the under-development of the transition regime concept. Early failures have retarded its subsequent uses. With access to wider evidence we can see that qualitative enquiries, single country or comparative, need to focus on pathways rather than selected socio-demographic groups (see Bynner and Roberts, 1991). We can also see that the TiY's original choice of countries among which to seek different regime types was too limited. Extend the range to America and we see a continuum with the USA's 'single procession' at one end and European countries' multi-track regimes bunched at the other, with Northern and North-West European countries closest to the American pole (see Gangl, 2001; Szydlik, 2002). The following examination of government supported apprenticeships in England uses this continuum.

However, a preliminary task is to develop the concept of transition regime. We need to jettison the static view with which quantitative research began. In practice regimes change constantly. Boundaries between pathways and steps within each are negotiated in employment and education markets. Agency is exercised by firms, education and training providers and young people as well as governments. Some government initiatives may be rejected by the markets. Others may replace or merge into existing pathways or find new

space alongside pathways that already exist (see Roberts, 2020). The value of any pathway is set by comparisons with adjacent pathways, specifically in the family and educational backgrounds of those entering and their eventual employment destinations. As long as young people with the relevant presenting features continue to enter the pathway and eventually enter the expected types of employment, the pathway will be consolidated. If the character of its recruits and destinations of leavers change, the pathway will begin to disintegrate. All actors make choices, always within constraints, and some actors are more powerful than others. Causality tends to flow downwards, started by employers offering different bands of jobs to young people leaving different pathways. These processes then work back to transitions from lower to upper secondary education, and before then from elementary to secondary schools.

The transition regime concept is essentially anti-fragmentation (as advocated by Scott, 2005). It resists slicing the field into sections, with researchers constantly seeking new under-researched crevices (see Urry, 1995). Transition regimes expose links to families of origin, the economy and politics. The concept reveals how changes in any of its wider contexts can destabilise, force modifications and more radical transformations of an entire regime.

Previous research has examined how England's transition regime was reconstructed from the 1980s onwards (Roberts, 2022). An academic route was widened. An expanding economy from 1992 produced as many low-skilled as high-skilled jobs (Goos and Manning, 2007), and enough of the former to haul down levels of youth unemployment. The next section examines the role of government supported apprenticeships during this wider transformation.

APPRENTICESHIPS

Modern Apprenticeships, 1994-2004

In 1994 Modern Apprenticeships joined the new bridges from education to work that UK governments had been introducing since the 1970s. Modern Apprenticeships joined rather than replaced the existing version of Youth Training which had been the main new bridge from 1983 onwards. The Youth Training Scheme (YTS) had been launched as a one year scheme in 1983, re-launched as a two year scheme in 1986, and given a final re-launch in 1990, rebranded simply as Youth Training. The apprentice label had been rejected when the YTS was first launched. Apprenticeships were considered old fashioned and associated with time-serving in declining industries. The YTS Leaving Certificate was to be a superior qualification. This did not work out!

Modern Apprenticeships differed from preceding new bridges in several ways. First, apprentices were

employees, entitled to the minimum wage for their age from 1999. There was no 'youth guarantee' of a place for everyone who was otherwise unemployed or at risk. Apprenticeships were not intended to mop up unemployment. Apprentices were chosen and paid by their employers, as with traditional apprenticeships. Employers' costs were partly reimbursed by the government. Second, the target recruits were young people who would alternatively have taken A-levels or the vocational equivalents, usually the BTEC National (Field, 2018). A continuity with Youth Training (with hindsight a mistake) was that apprentices were required to take National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). These qualifications had been launched in 1985. Syllabuses for different business sectors were composed by committees on which employers were well-represented. This was supposed to guarantee that the holders would possess skills and knowledge that employers valued. However, the BTECs that were to be superseded were supposed to have been employer-led, and likewise the Ordinary and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas that had been introduced in the 1920s. Research has now shown that the employers who lead these qualifications are regarded by most firms as distant elites. Businesses want to train for their own specific requirements which they know best. Government schemes will be taken-up only if they have the flexibility to make this possible (Confederation of British Industry, 2019; Fleckenstein and Lee, 2018; IFF Research Limited, 2000; McGurk and Meredith, 2018).

From their launch Modern Apprenticeships were battling against strong headwinds. They were bound to inherit some of the tarnished reputation of previous new bridges introduced by governments since the 1970s. They were competing against an 'academic route' that had broadened and swollen during the 1980s (see Roberts, 2020, 2022). The proportion of 16 year olds gaining GCSE results that qualified them to proceed to A-levels had risen. Modern Apprenticeships were supposed to enable employers to make a competitive offer, but firms still complained that schools were holding on to too many of their bright 16 year olds (Economic Research Services, 1998). The proportion of young people progressing into higher education had risen from around 15 percent in the 1970s to 30 percent by the early-1990s. This 'academic route' had become the default option for the majority. Former polytechnics and colleges of higher education were allowed to convert into universities from 1992. By the end of the 1980s a hierarchy of routes ahead was recognised by 16 year olds, parents and teachers: A-levels then university for the most able, vocational qualifications (usually BTECs) for the next band, jobs for the rest and training schemes for those with no alternative (Roberts, 1995). These were young people's first steps into the transition regime. Once established, all such regimes develop an inbuilt resilience. Pathways define each other's

boundaries and rankings. Modern Apprenticeships were bound to be grouped alongside jobs and training schemes, beneath full-time education routes. The mistake in requiring apprentices to enrol for NVQs, parodied by employers as a meaning 'not very qualified', soon became apparent. BTECs remained the prestige vocational qualification and will probably remain so despite competition from T-levels, another employer-led set of qualifications that was launched in the 2020s. By 2023 these qualifications were facing difficulties in recognition, recruitment, and retention, with the outcome that governments were unable to implement the threat to defund all other vocational qualifications (Ofsted, 2023). Modern Apprenticeships were intended to reopen employer-led training for young people for whom the academic route was really too demanding. There was an immediate upsurge of interest from young people and a shortage of the apprenticeships. The apprentice 'brand' did not have recognition problems! It signalled a superior form of youth training, better than a 'scheme'.

From their beginning in 1994 to the present, government supported apprenticeships have experienced an unsettled history. Responsibility has been shuffled between government departments, themselves with changing titles. Apprenticeships have always been a minor part of a Secretary of State's portfolio. Unless otherwise stated, the statistics in what follows are from data releases by the Department for Education, Department for Children, Schools and Families, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, Labour Force Surveys, and Powell (2019, 2024). No consistent statistical time series were produced until 2015. There were spasmodic data releases on apprentice starts and completions in different groups of occupations and parts of the country.

On the basis of this evidence, by the end of the 1990s Modern Apprenticeships were being labelled 'another flop' (Kingston, 1999). There were two principal criticisms. First, the numbers were pathetically low: just 130,000 starts from 1994-1999, 30,000 in an average year but rising, and the total reached 40,000 in 2001-2002. These starts accounted for under five percent of cohorts of between 650,000 and 700,000. There was not a shortage of interest or applicants among young people. Advertised apprenticeships were heavily over-subscribed. Young people and their parents frequently complained that there were no apprenticeships in their preferred occupations within their travel areas. Careers advisers wondered why this new route had not reached their territories. In defence, it could be argued that quality was taking precedence over quantity. Availability depended on employers, not government ministers (Sims et al, 2000). Most recognition problems were with employers. Take-up was not intended to be mainly in industries with histories of

apprenticeships. The economy had changed. Modern Apprenticeships were taken-up in expanding employment sectors. From the start the sectors that have trained most apprentices have been Business Administration and Law, and Health, Public Services and Care.

A second criticism was the high drop-out rates (IFF Research Limited, 2000). This has remained an issue. For example, in 2019-2020 there were 323,000 apprentice starts but just 147,000 completions. However, non-completion has not usually been a problem for either apprentices or their employers. The apprentices have wanted enduring employment. Firms have wanted employees. When an employer was satisfied that an apprentice had learnt enough there was no reason to continue, and likewise an apprentice when offered an indefinite employment contract. Neither side saw reason to learn and demonstrate superfluous skills. Apprentices would willingly forego a 'completion certificate' and NVQs.

On the credit side, employers and apprentices expressed high levels of satisfaction with their experience (Economic Research Services, 1998; Saunders, 1997). Also, economists found that an apprenticeship increased expected lifetime earnings to the same extent as a university degree, though from a lower benchmark (Jenkins et al, 2007; McIntosh, 2007). Yet up to the early 21st century, there had been no vacant space around the middle of the transition regime that Modern Apprenticeships could fill. Even after 10 years they had been unable to nudge and sit alongside the A-level route towards university or even established full-time vocational courses, mainly BTECs. Apprentice pay could be equalled by students' part-time evening and weekend jobs.

Even so, the government had plans that would expand its annual intakes of apprentices to around 175,000, roughly 28 percent of each cohort (Spielhoffer and Sims, 2004).

Expanding Downwards, 2004-2010

In 2004 there was a major overhaul. 'Modern' was dropped from the title. Forthwith it was simply apprentices and apprenticeships. The requirement to take NVQs was dropped (at last). More consequentially, a new Level 2 apprenticeship was created. Existing apprenticeships became 'Advanced' and placed at Level 3 in a government classification of qualifications. This made Level 3 the vocational equivalent of A-levels, the normal gateway to university, but this placement of Level 3 apprenticeships in a government scheme did not mean that young people, universities or employers would treat Advanced apprenticeships as equivalent. Wherever possible in market societies decisions are left to markets – in this case education and labour markets – rather than settled by state diktat. The government's

classification made the new band at Level 2 the equivalent of good results at GCSE, operationalised as five good passes (grades A-C, later 9-4) including maths and English. This did not mean that all Level 2 apprentices would reach the vocational equivalent of the GCSEs. As with Advanced apprenticeships, those at Level 2 could be terminated early for the same reasons: an offer of a permanent job with the training firm, or a better job with a different employer. Level 2 apprenticeships were called Intermediate. At that time, and still, there is no apprentice level below the intermediate. Advanced apprenticeships normally ran for two or three years, but the minimum requirement for all young people at all levels was just one year which became common at Level 2. The mere existence of Level 2 made Level 3, the original Modern Apprenticeships, somewhere higher, above the bottom.

A second highly consequential change in 2004 was opening apprenticeships to all ages. This could be seen as removing age discrimination, but it was also changing the traditional meaning of an apprenticeship. From medieval times an apprentice had been a young person making his (usually) entry to the workforce and adulthood.

However, Level 2 and the removal of age limits solved the numbers problem. By 2007-2008 there were 100,000 starts per year. Level 2 also helped to mop up the youth unemployment which had been a persistent challenge for policy makers since the 1970s. The New Deal for 18-25 year olds that was launched in 1999 had turned out to be another exercise in ‘churning’ out of then back into unemployment (Hasluck, 2000; Percy-Smith and Weil, 2002; Worth, 2005). The Connexions service which had been created in 2001 with the priority aim of reducing the number of long-term NEETs had failed. Most of the young unemployed turned out to be in transition between jobs or waiting to start jobs having left school or college. Most of the remainder who were not in employment, education or training were excluded by

conditions or circumstances which made none an immediate option (Department for Education and Skills, 2004; Mortimore et al, 2003). Connexions was disconnected from central government funding in 2011.

During the 1990s Britain had begun creating as many ‘lousy jobs’ as ‘lovely jobs’, the latter in management and professional grades. (Goos and Manning, 2007). At the bottom of the labour market there were more jobs on retail parks, in warehouses, bars, hotels and restaurants, delivering by bicycle, van and foot, taxi-driving, alongside expanding armies of self-employed gardeners and cleaners. These were jobs that Level 2 apprentices could fill. There was room in the transition regime for the downward extension of apprenticeships, especially with these being open to all ages. Downward expansion led to warnings that the apprentice ‘brand’ was being devalued (Dolphin and Lanning, 2011; Richard, 2012), and accusations of ‘another great training robbery’ (Ainley, 2016; Allen and Ainley, 2014). However, the apprentices were being recruited into actually existing jobs, not occupations in a wished-for workforce. In any case, the government had plans for new ‘world class apprenticeships’ which would strengthen ‘the brand’ (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills/Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). Meanwhile, evidence accumulated on the excellent financial returns to apprenticeships, and the substantial overlap between the earnings of university graduates and ex-apprentices in their twenties (Bhogal, 2015; Learning and Skills Council, 2009; Paton, 2014).

Aiming Higher

Table I lists all the major changes to government supported apprenticeships since their introduction in 1994. In 2010 a new band of Higher Apprenticeships was introduced. This was placed at Level 4 in the government’s classification making it equivalent to a Certificate of Higher Education which can be awarded on completing just one year of a degree course.

Table I

1994	Modern apprenticeships Level 3. Alternative to A-levels for 16-18 year olds, but open to everyone up to age 25 Must take National Vocational Qualifications
2004	‘Modern’ dropped. NVQ requirement dropped. Level 2 introduced. Age limit dropped
2010	Higher apprenticeships introduced
2015	Degree apprenticeships introduced. Full-time learning compulsory up to age 18
2016	Apprentice ‘brand’ legally protected
2017	Training levy: 0.5% of payroll at establishments with payroll £3m-plus

However, apprentices would reach Level 4 along a vocational route which set them in technician grades or on the initial steps of a professional career. The expectation was that after completion of an

apprenticeships young adults would continue to climb the steps The government’s classification promotes the idea of an occupational structure comprising steps which individuals can ascend by gaining certificated

knowledge and skills. Higher apprenticeships could be entered by 16 and 17 year olds, but more likely by 18 year olds with A-levels or the vocational equivalents (McEwan, 2019).

By 2015-16 Higher Apprenticeships looked like another flop. They were recruiting just 27,000 starters per year, fewer than the original Modern Apprenticeships five years after their introduction in 1994. However, by 2015 the entire apprenticeship programme was recording 509,000 annual starts to which the Advanced band contributed 191,000. It appeared that momentum had taken time to develop. By 2015 the appeal of Level 3 will have been strengthened by the introduction of student fees: £1K a year to be paid upfront in 1999, raised to £6K in 2006 funded by government fee loans, then to £9K in 2012. This is an example of the value of one pathway being raised or lowered by changes in an adjacent pathway.

The fastest growth in 2015 had been by over-25 year olds (224,000 starts) but there were more starts - 285,000 in total - by the under-25s. This suggests that between 40 and 45 percent of each cohort were then entering the workforce via government supported apprenticeships. The majority of all apprenticeships (291,000 out of the 509,000 in 2015) were at Level 2. Just 27,000 were at the Higher level. If young people aim higher after A-levels or the vocational equivalents they will be aiming for university degrees, Level 6 rather than Level 4.

A transition regime perspective requires us to ask where the 285,000 under-25 year old apprentices had come from. Which routes had contracted? The answer is 'none'. There is some 'deadweight' in all government subsidies for employment and training. Support is given for jobs and training that would have happened in any case. If apprentice support had raised skill levels and made the individuals more productive, this should show up in enhanced workforce productivity, national economic performance and higher real wages. In practice all had stagnated since 2010 (Resolution Foundation and Centre for Economic Performance, LSE, 2022) It seems possible that the entire state investment in apprenticeships up to 2015 was deadweight (see also Richmond, 2020).

During the 1980s a new occupation and type of business had been formed: middlemen or brokers who helped to administer and promote the government-supported employment and training of the 1980s. Government supported apprenticeships enabled brokers to continue in business during and after the 1990s. The brokers would register young people who were seeking apprenticeships and employers who wanted or could be persuaded to recruit. Brokers then matched the two. Brokers would handle the paperwork in registering the employers and apprentices, complete reports on progress, and claim the funds for which their employer clients were eligible, a

slice of which was kept by the brokers. The employers of the apprentices were usually delighted to be relieved of paperwork, and government offices had reduced numbers of clients (just the brokers) with whom to deal. Brokers could explain to firms how, possibly with slight modifications, they could claim government support for their normal induction and in-career training.

Firms have never been obliged to train within government schemes. Since 2016 the apprentice 'brand' has been legally protected. Other trainees cannot be called apprentices (according to law). However, some trades, typically in construction, have kept their training separate having found that this works for them. They have continued in their customary ways avoiding bureaucracy and forgoing government grants that would cover only a tiny fraction of their total labour costs. This is despite brokers showing how little they would need to change in order to receive funding from the government's apprentice programme.

The major changes in government supported apprenticeships between 2010 and 2017 were due to changes in the context. In 2017 a training levy was introduced for firms with payrolls in excess of £3 million. They could recoup the levy by training apprentices. Other smaller firms could also qualify for grants. The levy was supposed to increase take-up but had the reverse effect. Fear of closer monitoring and more complicated forms led to exits. The post-2017 decline in apprentice numbers was especially steep among over-25 year olds.

However, the overall decline had begun in 2015. Since then young people have been required to remain in full-time learning to age 18. It is possible, but it rarely happens, that this can be an apprenticeship. It is also possible, but rare, for 14-16 year olds to be apprenticed. The post-2015 decline in apprentice numbers was steepest among those aged under 19, and in the Intermediate apprenticeships that had targeted 16-18 year olds. The total starting these apprenticeships fell from a peak of 291,000 to just 76,000. The number of Advanced apprenticeship starts climbed after 2010, peaked at 191,000, then fell back to 148,000 in 2022-2023.

In 2015 there were still only 27,000 higher apprentice starts, but this had risen to 113,000 in 2022-2023. By then the entire apprentice brand was being boosted by the launch of degree apprenticeships. There were 47,000 starts in 2022-23. The majority of those starting Higher apprenticeships were aged over 25 but hardly any of the degree apprentices. They started their apprenticeships at the normal age for beginning a university degree.

Degree Apprenticeships, 2015-

These are entirely deadweight. They have not changed higher education student numbers, the employers who recruit graduates, or the socio-economic demographics

of either. Any expectations that degree apprenticeships would appeal especially to potential students from working class homes who believed that universities were ‘not for them’ but who were more familiar with apprenticeships, proved mistaken. A study of young people heading for careers as solicitors found that it was those with graduate parents who recognised a good deal while working class students were more cautious and preferred the normal route through full-time higher education (Casey and Wakeling, 2022).

Degree apprentices are chosen and recruited by firms. The employers receive a government grant which just covers, and must be used to pay university fees. They must employ the apprentice, pay a salary and provide workplace training. After four or five years the degree apprentices must complete their degrees, and also gain at least a Level 4 vocational/professional qualification. Firms have found that they can recruit A* apprentices. Competition is as fierce as for Oxbridge. The university partners receive A* students but must offer teaching that is compatible with the lives of students who are following their employers’, not the academic calendar. If firms can offer 20 or more students a university may schedule dedicated teaching. Otherwise a university may identify a group of employers who will agree a common teaching schedule. Or a firm may set the apprentice’s timetable so that he or she can share classes with full-time students. Degree apprenticeships cannot be created by universities, but universities can suggest to employers who normally recruit their graduates that they might consider switching all of some of this recruitment to 18 year olds.

The attraction for the degree apprentices is that they emerge debt-free and have a four or five year lead in workplace experience over normal graduate recruits. They lose the normal student lifestyle. Their daily, weekly and annual schedules are set by their employers.

Table II

Apprentice starts, August 2022-July 2023 (in thousands)

	< 19	19-24	Older	Total
Intermediate	33	22	22	76
Advanced	38	47	62	148
Higher	7	30	76	113*
Total	78	99	161	337

*Includes 47K degree apprenticeships.

41% starts were with new employees.

Roughly a half of starts were by over-25 year olds. ‘Apprentice’ in England is no longer linked to any age group or career stage. Nor is it linked to a specific level of achievement. Apprenticeships can be as short as six months for the over-25s, and 12 months for the younger groups. Roughly a half do not complete their apprenticeships.

There is no long summer vacation. They gain freedom from the debts of around £50,000 that normal graduates will repay for the greater part of their working lives, adding nine percent to their marginal tax rates. Apprentices also gain, at age 18/19, smooth progression to careers with A* graduate employers. Firms gain what they have long hoped for: the ability to tempt the brightest 18 year olds into workplaces.

In some respects degree apprenticeships take a step back beyond the 1960s when the normal route into professions was to end full-time education at age 16 or 18 then gain professional qualifications through part-time study. The difference is that degree apprentices also have degrees. Another historical throwback is to the age when A* students won scholarships while other students had to find other ways of financing their higher education (nowadays student loans and other debts, part-time jobs, and ‘the bank of mum and dad’). How long will it take for public debate on why only degree apprentices should have their university fees paid by the government? Also, why should it be employers who pick the prize winners? In 2022-2023 there were 47,000 degree apprentice starts, but no more than 37,000 could have been under-25 year olds taking Bachelor degrees. They would have accounted for around 15 percent of all UK student starts at English universities.

Government Supported Apprenticeships after 30 Years

An ‘achievement’ of government support as apprenticeships approach their thirtieth anniversary has been to strip English apprenticeships of any meaning except that the employment has received some state support. This is tapered by age with the youngest 16-18 year olds qualifying for most and the over-25s receiving least. Table II gives a full breakdown of starts in 2022-2023.

The scale of the programme may look huge but the total accounts for well under one percent of the entire workforce, and the state support reaches only a tiny fraction of in-service training. Around a quarter of employees receive some in-service training in every year (Office for National Statistics, 2019). The number of starts splits quite evenly between under- and over-25 year olds, but apprenticeships are far more dense in the younger age group. In 2022-2023 around a quarter of young people were starting an apprenticeship before age 25.

The number of starts peaked in 2015 at just over half a million then fell back and has stabilised at around 330,000 annually. The drop in numbers after 2015 was mainly due to 16-18 year olds being required to remain in full-time learning, and was associated with a decline in the number of Level 2 apprenticeships. Training levy effects were mainly on starts by over-25 year olds.

Advanced, the original Modern Apprenticeships in 1994, built up slowly but in 2022-2023 accounted for the largest number of starts in every age group. Level 3 signposts a route into middling jobs for university graduates or 18 year olds with Level 3 academic qualifications (A-levels). Advanced apprenticeships will train them in office and laboratory work. These apprenticeships are also a route into relatively skilled working class occupations which require an extended period of initial training. The quarter of each cohort that now enters the labour market via a government supported apprenticeship overlaps with the roughly 40 percent who progress through higher education. In addition to the degree apprentices, as in Germany an apprenticeship can precede or follow a university course.

State support is spread like a thin veil across the entire workforce, with support available for new recruits to a company and in-service training. In 2022-2023 nearly 60 percent of apprenticeships were supporting in-service training. The light and uneven drip of support from the thin veil has not overhauled the transition regime. Rather, the regime has been supported by the gentle upward pressure on employment levels which is concentrated among the under-25s. However, the youth transition regime has been tweaked in two significant ways.

First, apprenticeships have reduced precarity in the early careers of less qualified school and college leavers by funding starts in which they can remain for at least 12 months. The unemployment rate for the UK's 18-24 year olds who are not in full-time education is not the lowest in Europe, but it is beneath the mid-point. It was around 10 percent just before the Covid lockdowns, rose to 13 percent in mid-2020, then fell back quickly and remained around 10 percent.

However, unemployment is much more common among 16 and 17 year olds who do not remain in full-time education despite the legal requirement. Their unemployment rate was around 20 percent pre-pandemic, rose to a peak of 34 percent in 2020, then subsided to the pre-pandemic level. Government supported apprenticeships can only assist individuals who are within their reach who need to be available for and offered employment. The apprenticeships are unlikely to have made inroads into the fifth of 19 year olds who left education with 'nothing' in 2019, meaning no qualifications of any value in the labour market

(Children's Commissioner, 2019). School absences doubled between 2019 and 2022 (Owston, 2023). From age 13/14 pupils who realise that they are aiming for 'fail' grades in examinations are likely to disengage. The pandemic lockdowns appear to have eroded the notion that you 'have' to attend school. Meanwhile, referrals to children's and adolescents' mental health services have reached record levels (Mind, 2024). Between 2001 and 2011 Connexions demonstrated that, at that time, around 10 percent of young people were simply not available for employment, education or training on account of domestic responsibilities, health issues (including drug use), police, courts and justice system entanglements. By the 2020s the total would have risen. They cannot be reached by apprenticeships.

The second significant change has been degree apprenticeships which have created a new elite who enter a privileged track towards professional and management careers in all sectors of the economy.

Neither of these successes is widely recognised and broadcast. The success with youth unemployment (subject to the above qualifications) was always intended. The new graduate elite is more of an accidental by-product but is likely to become highly consequential.

CONCLUSION

Plotting the development of government-supported apprenticeships against a transition regime landscape reveals where and how the programme has made a difference. This treatment scans entire cohorts and the entire workforce throughout which apprenticeships are spread like a thin veil. The veil drips money to employers which, at the margin, must push gently upwards on levels of employment.

Prior to 1994 and still the largest single pathway towards employment in England has been via higher education (see Roberts, 2022). This path forks after graduation. Some are recruited to long, potentially high-rising careers. The majority move into middle bands of employment which is where they are most likely to remain. These bands of occupations are also accessible at age 18/19, but the choice is not primarily a young person's. Employers decide whether to employ and train 18/19 year olds when they could recruit graduates. The minority of young people who do not achieve the qualifications required for higher education, most of whom stumble at age 16, are likely to find their choices limited to low-skilled, low-paid jobs and the Level 2 apprenticeships which have been absorbed into these opportunity structures.

The transition regime perspective underlines what government support has not changed despite the extent to which the programme has been expanded. Apprenticeships have not restored a declining pathway

or created any new ones. They are unlike traditional apprenticeships which declined from around 250,000 in 1966 to just 53,000 in 1990 (Skills Commission, 2009). Post-1994 government supported apprenticeships might have created similar apprenticeships for different 'modern' occupations alongside older trades. This could have been, but it has not been the outcome of the government offer because firms have responded differently.

It is doubtful whether apprenticeships have boosted the short- or longer-term earnings of the individuals who are trained. Before and after comparisons between apprentices and others of the same age can be misleading. It is like university vice chancellors boasting that the graduate premium remains intact while the real starting pay of graduates has declined (Elias et al, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2023). The comparison that would reveal apprenticeship effects on earnings during early working life would compare the cohorts for whom apprenticeships have been available with predecessors with similar family class origins and prior educational attainments. The results can be predicted confidently because we already know that the only uplift in young workers' earnings since 1994 has been due to the minimum wage.

Traditional apprenticeships and European multi-track routes through education and training were created for societies when 'getting a trade' made you 'skilled for life' (Ryrie and Weir, 1978). This front-loaded model does not match careers in the twenty-first century. The American type of regime has proved more suited to these conditions, and Britain has moved closer towards it. Young people are recruited into different career tracks based on the levels at which they exit full-time education, then at the top according to the standing of the universities from which they graduate and their degree results. Learning then becomes continuous. Employers have used government supported apprenticeships to meet their requirements. This has worked for them provided young people have accepted the opportunities. Table II (above) summarises the outcome of maximising the role of markets in determining how and for whom government support is used.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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