SUN Research Project Report: Phase 1

Understanding the barriers to a career choice of technical apprenticeships

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Executive Summary

Background

The aim of this research was to investigate the factors which affect the likelihood of a learner from a disadvantaged background making a technical apprenticeship their career choice. This stemmed from previous research by two of the authors which had found that there were a low number of engineering apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds enrolled at a local south coast college. Given recent governmental reforms of careers advice and guidance, the research was particularly interested in careers advice and guidance from the perspective of NCOP leaners and how this may impact upon apprenticeship progression.

Methodology

14 participants across Years 10 and 11 were recruited from four SUN target schools. Each participant took part in a one-on-one semi structured interview with an experienced Research Assistant. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, took place on school grounds, and no other people were present in the interviews. Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and transcribed into Microsoft Word. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of analysis.

Key Findings

- All participants had received formal careers guidance within school and were generally satisfied with the provision.

- Participants were aware of apprenticeships and generally spoke about them in a positive manner. However, their knowledge from formal advice was often limited and vague and they often relied on 'hot' sources of knowledge such as family, friends, and peers.

- The three key barriers to apprenticeship progression were:

  The reinforcement of the A-level to university route;

  The perception that apprenticeships are for certain types of young people;

  Limited knowledge.

Key Recommendations

- Schools should ensure that apprenticeships are being presented on an equal footing to the traditional A-level – university route.

- Schools should be helping to break down stereotypes surrounding apprenticeships.

- Schools should consider making use of current or past apprentices as role models.

- Schools have a role in helping to improve the awareness and knowledge of apprenticeships with parents/carers of NCOP learners.

Introduction

Background

Building on research already undertaken with engineering apprentices at an FE College in the south of England (Humphries-Smith & Hunt, 2017 and Humphries-Smith, White & Hunt, 2017), the aim of this research project was to investigate the factors which affect the likelihood of a learner from a disadvantaged background making a technical apprenticeship their career choice. The research already undertaken included data from one set of around 500 engineering apprentices based at the college which indicated there are a disproportionately low number of apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds. In order to understand the reasons for this, this project focused on careers advice and guidance from the perspective of a group of NCOP learners. Careers advice and guidance was considered in its widest sense to include formal advice and guidance within school (such as interviews and careers fairs), as well as informal avenues such as family and local networks.

The research links with the SUN research theme: 'Technical qualifications – Apprenticeships and aspiration to higher education' as well as with one of the overall aims of NCOP being to: "support young people to make well-informed decisions about their future education" (Office for Students, 2019). In a wider context, the research is set within recent UK governmental reforms of school careers advice and guidance. The project ran from January 2019 to the end of October 2019.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are to:
- To understand the differences in lived experience of careers related advice and support of the target ward learners (as defined by NCOP);
- To establish and disseminate best practice with a view to increasing the number of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds taking up technical apprenticeships.

Methodology

Research Questions

The research question to be answered by this study is:

1. What are the reasons for choosing a technical apprenticeship as a career path and the barriers to this path for learners with disadvantaged backgrounds?

Research Design

The study adopted an interpretivist viewpoint, with the intention to understand "the world of human experience" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.36), in this specific case, the experiences of careers advice and guidance from the perspective of a group of Y10-11 NCOP school pupils. The study used qualitative methods to answer the research question, namely semi-structured interviews. The benefit of such an approach being that whilst it allows a level of structure to enable research questions to be answered, it affords a level of flexibility that enables the experiences of participants to shed new light on the topic (Galletta, 2012).

Sample

Seven local SUN target schools located along the south coast of England were approached (initially via an email to the head/principle from SUN staff) to take part in the research. Schools were selected on the basis of their over or under representation of NCOP learners progressing into apprenticeships. In total, four schools[1] responded to the request (as detailed below).

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[1] All schools are participant names were anonymised.

School	Representation of NCOP learners taking up Apprenticeships 17/18 data	
	Target ward population	% of apprentices coming from NCOP target ward
A	45%	50%
B	26%	45%
C	38%	36%
D	20%	68%

From there, participants were recruited via gatekeepers (SUN points of contact) within each school, with the aim of recruiting four-five participants per school. Purposive sampling was used with the following requirements placed upon recruitment:

- Participants primary home address was within an NCOP target ward
- Participants had the potential to reach a Level 4 qualification by the age of 19
- Participants were in Year 10 or 11

In total 14 (M=8, F=6) participants were recruited, as detailed in the table below.

School	Recruited	Year Group
A	4 (2M, 2F)	11
B	2 (2M)	11
C	3 (2M, 1F)	11
D	5 (2M, 3F)	10

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted face to face by an experienced Research Assistant (RA). Interviews took place within meeting rooms on school grounds during normal school

operating hours. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, lasted between 30-60 minutes, and no other people were present in the interviews.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word by the project RA. The RA then analysed the data using thematic analysis, in order to determine the impact of the experience of careers advice and guidance on the target ward learners. The six phases of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) were followed (see appendices).

Limitations

It may have been beneficial if some of the participants had been on a definitive apprenticeship pathway. This would have enabled a comparison to be made between those on an apprenticeship pathway and those not, to establish any key differences in the experiences of the two groups.

At the start of the project, the team identified a number of key schools to approach to take part in the study. Despite multiple attempts, not all schools responded to the request.

Results

The results are presented in three sections.
- Experiences of formal careers advice and guidance;
- Knowledge of apprenticeships;
- Barriers to a career choice in technical apprenticeships.

Experiences of formal careers advice and guidance

All participants had received formal careers guidance within school. This primarily came in the form of one-on-one interviews with a careers advisor and careers fairs (both inside and outside of school). Whilst several participants had been on university trips, this appeared to be for a selected cohort (such as Gifted and Talented) as opposed to an all year activity.

Several participants discussed that local universities had visited their school for workshops, with one participant specifically referencing SUN.

Participants acknowledged the importance of receiving good careers advice at school and were generally satisfied (although not in all cases) with the advice that they had received. Their generally positive portrayal of careers advice should also been in the context of their positive experiences of schooling in general (with one participant from school C being the exception to this). In terms of how advice could be improved, several suggestions were made; the most cited being the need for earlier advice (particularly around GCSE choices). Other suggestions included making the advice more specific to the learner, more frequent advice, and being presented with more options.

Perhaps surprisingly, given that 83% of young people aged 12-15 in the UK have their own smartphone and 99% of them go online for nearly 21 hours a week (Ofcom, 2017), there appeared to be limited use of career websites (although participants often indicated they had been given websites to look at). This appeared to revolve around the perceived value in such sites.

Knowledge of apprenticeships

In terms of apprenticeships, participants were aware of them as an option and generally spoke about them in a positive way. Participants were able to outline several benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship. This revolved around:

Earning a wage;
Work experience;
Working and learning at the same time.

Participants were able to identify numerous disciplines (predominantly Level 2 and 3) in which an apprenticeship could be undertaken in, ranging from hair and beauty, media, engineering, and sport (see appendices). No distinction was made between craft and technical apprenticeships and only one participant made explicit reference to degree apprenticeships.

Within school, knowledge of apprenticeships appeared to predominantly come from careers fairs, assemblies and within one-to-one interviews. However, for many, their knowledge from official school sources appeared limited and often vague. This was especially the case for participants in schools A and D. Participants within those schools used phrases such as:

> *I haven't really heard a lot about apprenticeships really, especially not from this school* (Participant school A)

> *Not really that much, they don't really talk about apprenticeships* (Participant school D)

For many of these young people, their knowledge about apprenticeships predominantly appeared to come from more informal sources such as family and friends.

Barriers to a career choice in technical apprenticeships

Whilst participants generally spoke about apprenticeships in a positive way, none of the participants were currently on a definitive pathway to an apprenticeship. Analysis identified three key barriers:

- The reinforcement of the A-level to university route;
- The perception that apprenticeships are for certain 'types' of young people;
- Limited knowledge.

The reinforcement of the A-level to university route

There was a clear hierarchy of aspiration within the accounts of participants, with A-levels and university being the perceived aspirational path for young people to take. This was reflected in that ten of the participants were considering A-levels and eleven had some level of aspiration to go to university. In relation to apprenticeships, this meant that although some participants were open to the idea of undertaking an apprenticeship, they saw it as something that could run either alongside or after the traditional path rather than as the main educational choice.

The hierarchy was frequently reinforced within careers advice and guidance which they often felt was more geared towards that route. The key reason for this was the presence of a sixth form. The impact of a sixth form was twofold. Firstly, participants felt that it inevitably led to the school wanting to direct learners into the A-level route.

> *I think if there's a 6th form they probably would want us to come here* (Participant school A)

> *Like we're rarely told in class about doing an apprenticeship in anything and we're always told ok if you're good at science you'll do a science A-level, we're not told like ok if you're good at science you could do an apprenticeship in science* (Participant school B)

Secondly, from a personal perspective it also meant that for participants, sixth form provided them with an option that allowed them to stay in familiar surroundings, i.e. was a choice with a low level of 'risk'. The role of sixth form was also emphasised in that apprenticeships appeared to have been presented as a more viable option for participants from school C, which had no sixth form. It should be noted however, that the most available data set (2016 leavers) demonstrated that in three of the four schools, the percentage of pupils progressing into an apprenticeship after key stage 4 was higher than the national average (GOV.UK, 2019).

This hierarchical structure of educational choices was often reinforced at home, especially from parents. Some participants reported that their parents were clear that they wanted their child to follow the A-level to university route whilst a minority were discouraging of the apprenticeship route.

> *I think she* [mother] *would want me to* [go to university] *just because I think that she would want me to because its higher education and you get further up* (Participant school A)

> *I personally think because she* [mother] *sees my brother in university she wants me to follow in the same line* (Participant school D)

> <u>*The perception that apprenticeships are for certain 'types' of young people*</u>

This perception was viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, some participants identified apprenticeships as being more suitable for those young people who were lower academic achievers. This suggested a negative connotation of the apprenticeship route.

You don't really need like outstanding grades to get into them [apprenticeships] *if you know what I mean; they're sort of like base level grades so there more achievable for most people* (Participant school B)

I feel like some people aren't that academically talented, so they feel like they don't want to carry on with education (Participant school A)

Other participants felt apprenticeships were more about personal learning styles and preferences, thus presenting a positive viewpoint about apprenticeships.

Some people really like doing practical things and some people prefer to study (Participant school D)

I think I'm more academic in that I'd like going into a lesson and making notes and stuff and then I revise for a test, I don't enjoy the idea of having to learn whilst also on the job (Participant school C)

Limited knowledge

Whilst all participants had some knowledge of apprenticeships, the knowledge they had gathered from school was often limited and vague and potentially acts as a barrier to apprenticeship progression.

I haven't really heard a lot about apprenticeships really, especially not from this school, when I had my careers interview, they didn't tell me a lot about it (Participant school A)

For some, they appeared passive to any information they had received about apprenticeships, suggesting the apprenticeship route was not at the forefront of their mind. Further to this, whilst most participants knew at least one person who had or was undertaking an

apprenticeship, there appeared to be a limited amount of information sharing from these 'hot' sources.

Half of the participants stated that their parents/guardians (as opposed to school) were their primary source of advice on careers. However, many of their parents appeared to have limited knowledge about apprenticeships, with only one participant having a parent who had done an apprenticeship themselves. There also appeared to be limited discussions between participants and parents/guardians concerning apprenticeships.

Discussion

A key part of the UK government's 2017 careers strategy was the adoption of the eight Gatsby Benchmarks as a framework that defines "the best careers provision in schools and colleges" (Careers and Enterprise Company, 2019). Schools are working positively towards meeting the benchmarks, particularly in the case of this research, Benchmark 1: "A stable careers programme"; and Benchmark 8 "Every student should have opportunities for guidance interviews with a career adviser" (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2019). This suggests the widespread use of the benchmarks is having a positive impact on careers advice and guidance. This is reflected in generally (although not entirely) positive comments towards careers advice and guidance within school.

Whilst participants are aware of the apprenticeship option, the research identified three key barriers to apprenticeship progression, reflected in that none of the participants were on a clear pathway to an apprenticeship at level 4 or above.

The A-level to university route is still seen as the aspirational route for young people to take, based on the value associated with obtaining those qualifications. For many, apprenticeships appeared to be an afterthought to this more aspirational route. This feeling is undoubtedly being reinforced both within school and outside of it. Given the relentless push to increase university participation over the past twenty years, this finding is probably unsurprising. As previous research (such as Ryan & Lorinc, 2018)) has found, the presence of a sixth form appears to be especially important in this reinforcement, particularly as it provides young people with a choice that enables them to remain within surroundings in which they feel

comfortable. Similarly, it may lead to schools having a vested interest in promoting particular routes (Hogarth as cited in Ryan & Lorinc, 2018). However, more needs to done within schools to break the divide between the 'academic' option and the 'technical' one. In breaking this divide, schools will be meeting their duty to: "help pupils to make an informed choice about an academic option […] and a technical route" (Department for Education, 2018, p.11).

As part of this narrative, participants often viewed apprenticeships as being more suitable for certain individuals. Importantly, participants often spoke about other people, such as their friends or peers, as being more suited to an apprenticeship rather than themselves. This suggests that some young people still hold stereotypical views around apprenticeships. One of the things schools can do to begin to break down these stereotypes is to give pupils access to current or ex-apprentices that can share their experiences and outline the benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship, something that has been found to be an effective way of demonstrating the benefits of apprenticeships (Kashefpakdel & Rehill, 2018). This was identified by a participant in school A who felt that '*hearing from people who do them*' would make them more likely to want to do an apprenticeship.

Previous studies such as Lehmann & Taylor (2015) have indicated the importance of family and familiarity in the decision to undertake an apprenticeship. However, within this study, whilst each participant knew someone who had done or was doing an apprenticeship, they appeared to lack that familiarity with apprenticeships which meant an apprenticeship was not an "unquestioned consequence" (Lehman & Taylor, 2015, p.613) of their surroundings. If this is the case, then the role of official careers guidance becomes more important, particularly given the apparent general lack of knowledge of apprenticeships by the parents/guardians of participants. However, as outlined in the findings, participant's knowledge of apprenticeships through official advice was at times limited and vague, reaffirming Mann and Caplan (cited in Institute for Employment Research 2013) who suggest young people's knowledge of apprenticeships is 'hazy'. The impact of this lack of knowledge is emphasised by a review by the Institute for Employment Research (2013) that found that a lack of complete information about post-16 choices was a key issue in many young people having a lack of interest in apprenticeships.

Schools therefore must continue to close this knowledge gap through official careers advice and guidance, particularly for young people who may rely on limited (or indeed no) outside information about apprenticeships and other vocational choices. It also suggests that schools can play a role in helping to increase the knowledge of apprenticeships with parents/guardians, in order to support their children in making more informed choices about their future educational plans.

Recommendations

Based on the results from the research, the following recommendations are made:

- Schools should be continuing to work towards achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks whilst also ensuring apprenticeships are being presented on an equal footing to the traditional A-level – university route, particularly within schools with sixth forms. This includes breaking down stereotypes surrounding apprenticeships;

- Schools should consider making greater use of past or present apprentices as role models/mentors to encourage more young people to consider the apprenticeship route;

- Schools have a role to play in engaging with all parents/carers but particularly those of NCOP learners to improve their awareness and knowledge of apprenticeships;

- Future research should examine the experiences of learners that are not part of the NCOP cohort in order to establish whether there are differences in the experiences of NCOP learners and non NCOP learners;

- Future research should also adopt a multi perspective approach by examining the experiences of other groups such as parents/guardians.

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Appendices

Initial Interview Guide

The core questions are presented below:

THEME 1: Setting the Scene

Can you tell me about this school?

How well are you doing at school?

What options are available to you once you complete your GCSEs?

Have you thought about what you want to do as a job/career?

THEME 2: 'Cold' Knowledge

Have you been provided with careers advice at school?

Do you think careers education is important for young people?

If prompt needed – Have you heard of apprenticeships?

Does this school offer work experience?

What careers advice would you like / how could it be improved?

THEME 3: 'Hot' Knowledge

Outside of school who have you spoken to about what you do after your GCES?

What conversations do you have with your parents/carers about post GCSE options/ career plans?

What about conversations with siblings?

Do you talk to any other family members about these choices?

What about conversations with friends?

Are there any other influences/influencers you want to mention?

What do you think is going to be the most important factor in deciding what you do after GCSE's?

Sample Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

The title of the research project

What informs the decision-making process of young people in their career choices at year 10/11?

Invitation to take part

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you agree it is important for you to understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Who is organising/funding the research?

This research project is funded by the Southern Universities Network. The Southern Universities Network (SUN) is a collaborative partnership comprising of higher education providers in Hampshire, Dorset and the Isle of Wight. The partnership provides outreach activities for schools and colleges.

What is the purpose of the project?

The aim of this research is to get a detailed picture of how some young people in year 10/11 make decisions about their future career choices. We are especially interested in your views of the careers guidance you have received, both in and out of school. We also want to find out who and what plays a part in helping you make decisions about your future career choices. We will also be speaking to some parents/legal guardians to find out their opinions.

Why have I been chosen?

The research involves talking to learners and parents/legal guardians at several schools that are local to Bournemouth University. The schools were selected on the basis that they are part of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme. This is a scheme that runs across the whole country and provides outreach activities for young people in years 9-13.

You were then selected because of the following:

In the area where you live there are fewer young people going into higher education than expected, based upon their GCSE results;

You have the potential to progress to a qualification such as a university degree, higher apprenticeship or higher national certificate.

What would taking part involve?

You will be asked to attend an informal individual interview that will last approximately 45 minutes – 1 hour. The interview will take place on school grounds during normal school hours. The interview will be conducted by Dr Ed Bickle, who is a researcher at Bournemouth University. The research is being supervised by Dr Clive Hunt and Dr Tania Humphries-Smith, please see details below.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a participant assent form.

You can stop being part of the research without giving a reason until the interview has been analysed and put into the research findings and nothing that you would have told us will be used in the study. At this point your data will become anonymous, so your identity cannot be determined, and it may not be possible to identify your data within the anonymous dataset. Deciding to take part or not will not impact upon your education.

What are the advantages and possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

Some young people might find it useful to talk to someone about their future career choices. By taking part in the research you will also enable us to look at how careers related advice and guidance could be improved to ensure that all young people are fully aware of the opportunities available to them.

It is difficult to foresee any particular risk or disadvantage in participating in this research.

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

We will be asking you questions about what careers you are interested in, your experiences of careers related advice, guidance and opportunities in school and how you find out about career choices outside of school. We will also be asking you who or what influences you in making career choices. You do not have to answer all the questions and if you feel uncomfortable, you are free to end the interview at any point.

You must be aware that if you tell the researcher something that they think may affect your safety, they may need to tell someone at your school. The researcher will let you know that they are going to do this.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

By giving assent you will be giving permission for the interview to be recorded using a digital recording device. The recordings will be used only for analysis and the writing up of the recording (transcribing) for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. The recordings will be deleted at the end of the project.

How will my information be kept?

All the information we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly private. Any information we collect about you in paper will be kept in a secure location. Anything we collect electronically, such as the recordings of our conversation, will be password protected and kept on a secure network.

You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications about the research. Your information will only be included in these materials in an anonymous form, i.e. you will not be identifiable. Although what we publish will not identify you, we have to keep some data that is not anonymous in case we are asked to show how we obtained our research findings. This will be destroyed after five years.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or would like further information, please contact Dr Tania Humphries - Smith, Associate Professor, Department of Design & Engineering**,** thumphri@bournemouth.ac.uk or Dr Clive Hunt - Associate Professor, Department of Design & Engineering, chunt@bournemouth.ac.uk

In case of complaints

Any concerns about the study should be directed to ▓▓▓

Finally

If you decide to take part, you will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed participant assent form to keep.

Many thanks for taking the time to read through the information.

Sample Participant Assent Form

Participant Assent Form

Full title of project: What informs the decision-making process of young people in their career choices at year 10/11?

Name, position and contact details of researchers:

Dr Tania Humphries-Smith, Associate Professor, Department of Design & Engineering thumphri@bournemouth.ac.uk

Dr Clive Hunt, Associate Professor, Department of Design & Engineering chunt@bournemouth.ac.uk

Dr Ed Bickle, Research Assistant

PART A

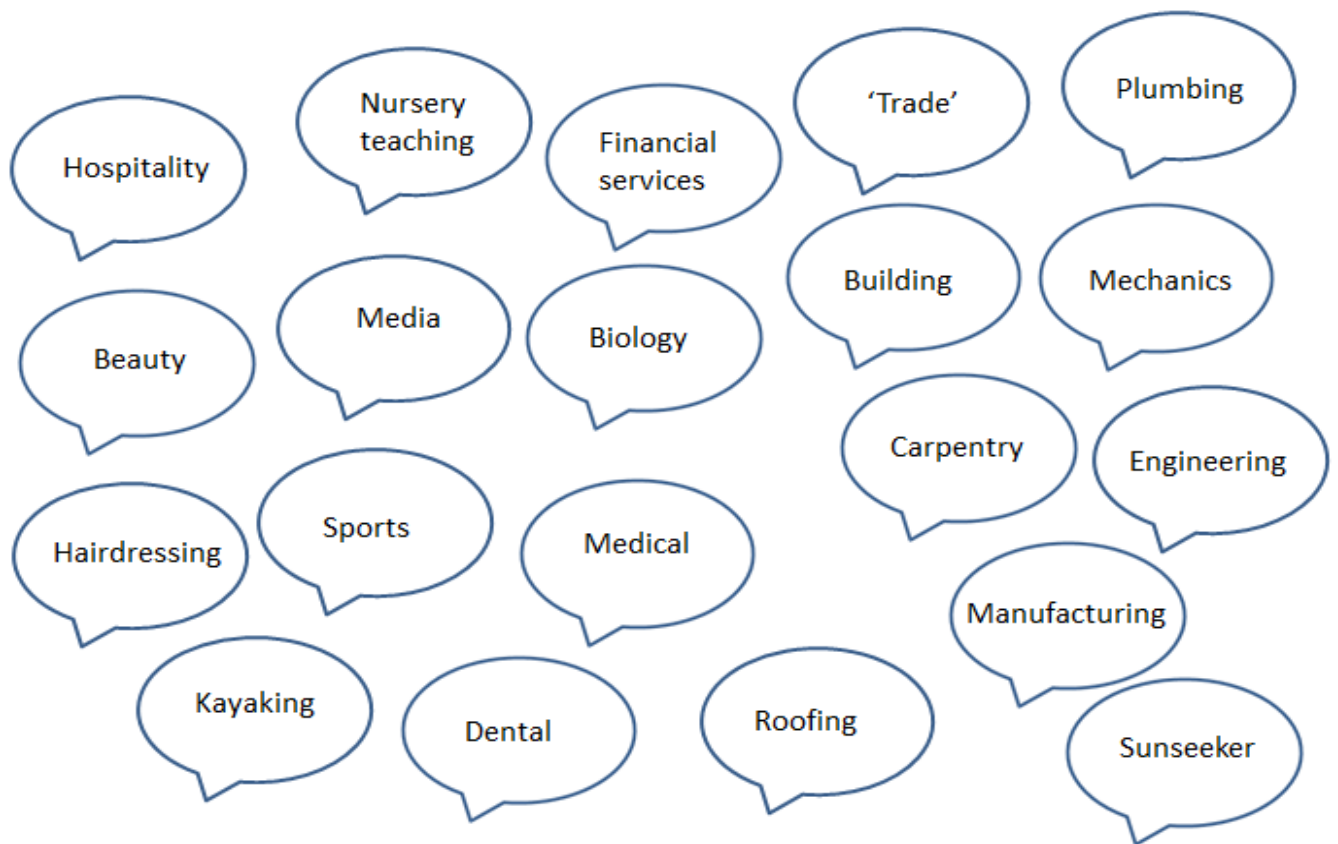In this Form we ask you to confirm whether you agree to take part in the Project. You should only agree to take part in the Project if you understand what this will mean for you. If you complete the rest of this form, you will be confirming to us that:

- You understand that:

    o Taking part in the research will include being recorded (audio) and these audio recordings will be deleted at the end of the project.

    o It is up to you to decide if you want to take part and that you are free to stop taking part at any point. You are free to decline to answer any particular question(s).

    o If you withdraw from participating in the Project, you may not always be able to withdraw all of your data from further use within the Project, particularly once we have anonymised your data and we can no longer identify you.

    o Data you provide may be used in an anonymised form by the research team to support other research projects in the future, including future publications, reports or presentations.

- You have read and understood the Project Participant Information Sheet;

- You have had the opportunity to ask questions.

Assent to take part in the Project	*Yes*	*No*
I agree to take part in the Project on the basis set out above	☐	☐

PART B Signature

_____   _____   _____
My name   Date   Signature

—————————————————————————   ———————————————   ——————————————————————————————————
Name of Researcher   Date   Signature

Once this has been signed by all parties you will receive a signed and dated copy of this and the information sheet. A copy will also be held by the research team and kept in a secure location.

What Subjects Can You Do an Apprenticeship In? (participant responses)

Hospitality

Nursery teaching

Financial services

'Trade'

Plumbing

Beauty

Media

Biology

Building

Mechanics

Hairdressing

Sports

Medical

Carpentry

Engineering

Kayaking

Dental

Roofing

Manufacturing

Sunseeker

Six Stages of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87