

Briefing: What Covid-19 means for young apprentices

June 2020

Summary

Covid-19 has brought a unique set of difficulties for young apprentices. This group is suffering both from the employment crisis and from complications with the support that they need to learn and progress. 1 in 5 of all apprentices have been made redundant, are on a break in learning or have left their programmes¹. Evidence suggests that the young are most likely to be left in these unfortunate positions. They are more likely to be in the sectors which are struggling due to the pandemic - over 55% of workers aged 16-19 years are in hospitality and retail compared to 18% of the wider workforce² - and they are over-represented in practical fields such as construction where working from home is a challenge. Young workers are also at greater risk of being furloughed than older ones (by 9 percentage points³).

Many providers are doing everything they can to continue training for their apprentices across this period, with one survey finding that 81% are still learning⁴. This includes furloughed apprentices who can continue their studies while not working. Young apprentices nevertheless face delays to assessments and difficulties with remote learning, preventing them from completing their apprenticeships. This in turn causes problems with opening up apprenticeship opportunities for the next cohort of young people.

Even prior to Covid-19, apprenticeships among young learners were in decline with starts for under-19s falling 23% between 2015/16 and 2018/19⁵. This is despite government targets made in 2015 to create 3 million apprenticeships by 2020, with a focus on young people in particular⁶. These targets were not achieved, and now apprentice starts are plummeting against a backdrop of rising youth unemployment. Figures released on 29th May show that only 1,040 apprenticeship starts took place among under 19 year olds between 23rd March to 30th April 2020 compared with 4,020 for the same period last year.⁷ Research has also found that employers are hiring 32% fewer people onto apprentice or school leaver programmes this year⁸, and projections indicate that the lowest qualified school leavers will be 37% less likely to be in work in 3 years' time.⁹

This briefing gives an overview of the major challenges during the pandemic with insights from current apprentices, as well as mapping out some of the harmful domino effects facing future cohorts. The

¹ <https://www.aelp.org.uk/news/news/press-releases/training-providers-working-miracles-to-preserve-apprenticeships-and-other-skills-programmes-but-living-on-borrowed-time-latest-aelp-covid-19-impact-survey-shows/> (survey does not provide breakdowns for young apprentices). A YouGov poll commissioned by the Sutton Trust found this was closer to 1 in 4 – 8% made redundant and 17% having their learning suspended: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-apprenticeships/>

² ONS Annual Population Survey – Workplace Analysis, England January-December 2019

³ Based on analysis of ONS data on furloughing rates between 23 March and 5 April using concentration of 16-19 year old workers by sector

⁴ As above

⁵ Apprenticeship starts fell from 116,400 to 89,370: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/apprenticeships-in-england-by-industry-characteristics-2018-to-2019>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-kick-starts-plans-to-reach-3-million-apprenticeships>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/apprenticeships-and-traineeships-may-2020> Caution is advised with interpretation of the data.

⁸ The Institute of Student Employers: <https://www.tes.com/news/employers-reduce-entry-level-jobs-quarter>

⁹ Projections for employment rate in 3 years time for low-skilled workers. Resolution Foundation, Class of 2020 briefing note: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/class-of-2020/>

complexity and diversity of their circumstances, as well as an absence of some key data, has meant that their experiences and prospects have been somewhat overlooked so far in discussions about vulnerable young people at a national level. Without more attention and action, there are multiple indicators that this vital alternative to formal education could become much less accessible, closing off opportunities for a group which the government has committed to invest in.

Young apprentices hit hardest

Between August and October 2019 there were over 105,100 young apprentices (under 19 years)¹⁰. Given new research finding that a quarter of training providers have closed¹¹ and industry estimates that most expect to downsize at least¹², we can expect that a sizeable majority of these young apprentices will be adversely impacted in some way, in addition to many more on traineeships. In fact, young apprentices are being hit significantly harder than older learners:

- > Figures released on 29th May for the Covid-19 lockdown period (23rd March to 30th April) show that apprenticeship starts for under 19s were a quarter of last year's numbers (1,040 down from 4,020). For 25+ years, apprenticeships only dropped by less than half from 14,700 last year to 8,590 this year.¹³
- > Young people are over-represented in industries which are struggling most – over 55% of workers aged 16-19 years are in hospitality and retail compared to 18% of the wider workforce¹⁴
- > They are much more likely than older apprentices to be learning in industries such as construction, retail or manufacturing, where working and learning from home is difficult¹⁵
- > Young workers are being furloughed at a rate of 36% compared to 27% for the workforce as a whole.¹⁶
- > According to the Resolution Foundation, one third of 18-24 year old employees have lost jobs or been furloughed, compared to one in six prime-age adults.¹⁷

It is been estimated that at least 1 in 5 of all apprentices are on a break in learning, have been made redundant or have left their programme. Although there are not yet national figures which fully break down apprentice circumstances under Covid-19 by age, the existing data suggests that young apprentices are more often the ones who have their apprenticeship disrupted.

¹⁰https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/875232/Further-education-and-skills-March-2020-main-tables.xlsx

¹¹ <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-apprenticeships/>

¹² 18% of training providers are under threat of closure, 28% expect to mothball their operations, and 55% to downsize:

<https://www.aelp.org.uk/media/3631/covid-19-impact-aelp-survey-initial-results-250320.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/apprenticeships-and-traineeships-may-2020>

¹⁴ ONS Annual Population Survey – Workplace Analysis, England January-December 2019

¹⁵ Department for Education, Apprenticeships in England by industry characteristics 2018 to 2019

¹⁶ Based on analysis of ONS data on furloughing rates between 23 March and 5 April using concentration of 16-19 year old workers by sector

¹⁷ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

Further difficulties for already disadvantaged learners

Apprenticeship starts among young learners have already been falling fast since 2015/16 as employers have shifted to favour older candidates¹⁸. This has become even more pronounced during lockdown which has seen 66% of apprenticeship starts coming from 25+ year olds, up 10 percentage points on the same time last year. The proportion of starts from under-19s has fallen from 15% to 8%.¹⁹ Covid-19 threatens to shut down yet more opportunities for those who want to go down a vocational route.



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This is a worry since apprentices are often those who have struggled with formal education and attainment²¹ and therefore need an alternative route to success. Training providers have also expressed apprehension to the Children’s Commissioner’s Office about ‘weaker’ learners being most at-risk of redundancy as employers reassess their options amid this crisis. This invariably means inexperienced young workers who need high levels of nurture and support. Care leavers who were incentivised in 2018 to start apprenticeships with bursary support²² may also fit into this category.

There is also a marked disparity between the government position on apprenticeships and its approach towards children in education. For apprentices, funding is being stopped when there is a break (longer

¹⁸ Apprenticeship starts fell from 116,400 to 89,370: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/apprenticeships-in-england-by-industry-characteristics-2018-to-2019> This trend follows the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy and removal of incentives for employers to take on young people.

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/apprenticeships-and-traineeships-may-2020>

²⁰

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/848372/201819_NOV_Apps_starts_planned_length_of_stay_Final_V0.1.xlsx

²¹ According to NCG which described profile as furloughed apprentices as tending to be young disadvantages males who tend to have attained less well at school, at most risk of becoming NEET. AoC Apprenticeships in the Current Climate Webinar Recording (23.04.20):

<https://www.aoc.co.uk/home/coronavirus-resources-covid-19/resources-college-staff/apprenticeships>

²² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-support-for-young-care-leavers-starting-an-apprenticeship>

than 4 weeks) in learning²³, contrasting with those continuing with traditional education for whom funding is continuing, even when students are not in school or further education colleges. Training providers have felt penalised by this strategy²⁴ which safeguards those in education but not in other forms of learning.

Delays to assessments

This is a particularly frustrating time for those who are ready to finish their apprenticeships but are not able to complete their end point assessments (EPAs) and gain the qualifications they have been working towards. The government has taken action to introduce flexibilities so that more EPAs can be done online²⁵. However, where it has been decided that remote assessment is not viable because observation of practical skills is needed, other assessments are being postponed.²⁶ This is most common in hands-on fields such as construction, plumbing, engineering and so on, which have high concentrations of young apprentices.²⁷ The Children's Commissioner's Office has also been alerted about postponement where assessing bodies have suspended their operations so do not have assessors available. These delays are leaving competent apprentices in limbo, with the prospect of an assessment far into the future, by which time they may have forgotten key aspects of their learning, and will have had no qualification to show for their efforts in the meantime. There is no expectation on students to do their A Levels in autumn after being out of school for months, but the equivalent is being asked of some apprentices.

Challenges with continuing learning

The government has urged employers and training providers to keep apprentices learning remotely as far as possible, even for those who have been furloughed. It is estimated 81% of all apprentices are still actively learning, with those furloughed sitting around the 35% mark²⁸. For some apprentices, being furloughed has been a good opportunity to catch up on their studying and work towards their qualifications. Some apprentices who spoke to the Children's Commissioner's office were enthusiastic about having time to "smash through their assignments" and were still receiving lots of support from staff remotely. As one put it:

"Well I'm not really enjoying having to sit in the house and not seeing all my work friends and stuff, like, I enjoy being in the office, but, in terms of hard work and getting things done it's actually been pretty positive for me 'cos I've had a lot of time to just sit down, focus on my coursework and hopefully get it done before I'm out of lockdown" – female apprentice, age 18.

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-programme-response/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-apprentices-employers-training-providers-end-point-assessment-organisations-and-external-quality-assurance-pro>

²⁴ <https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/44748-covid-91-impact-on-provision-for-apprentices-and-learners>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-programme-response/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-apprentices-employers-training-providers-end-point-assessment-organisations-and-external-quality-assurance-pro>

²⁶ In response to Covid-19, more flexibility has been brought in around Gateway sign-off and remote delivery of End Point Assessments (EPAs) to minimise disruption. However in some cases this is not practicable and EPAs are being postponed: <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/response-to-covid-19/>

²⁷ According to the NCG survey of around 2,200 apprentices, 85% of those furloughed are in construction, plumbing, electrical, motor vehicle and engineering occupations where the profile tends to be young disadvantages males who tend to have attained less well at school, at most risk of becoming NEET. AoC Apprenticeships in the Current Climate Webinar Recording (23.04.20): <https://www.aoc.co.uk/home/coronavirus-resources-covid-19/resources-college-staff/apprenticeships>

²⁸ 35% of all apprentices have been furloughed according to NCG survey of around 2,200 apprentices: AoC Apprenticeships in the Current Climate Webinar Recording (23.04.20): <https://www.aoc.co.uk/home/coronavirus-resources-covid-19/resources-college-staff/apprenticeships> YouGov polling commissioned by the Sutton Trust estimates this is around 36%: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-apprenticeships/>

Unfortunately, however, the furlough experience has not been plain sailing for everyone:

“I’ve been furloughed but I’ve not had any money through yet ‘cos when my boss’s accountant tries to get onto the website it’s just like hours of queues and we can’t actually get onto it to apply ... normally I get paid monthly but this is the fifth week or something so five weeks or something ... It’s just me and [my boss] working so he’s self-employed so he can’t afford to pay out of his own pocket” – male apprentice, age 17.

Mainly training providers are running as normal and are busy converting to a virtual model so that they can ensure continuity of learning for everyone. In some circumstances however, keeping up this learning has been a challenge, in very different ways:

- > Apprentices in key worker professions (e.g. health, food retail) are being expected to work full-time in the Covid-19 response and therefore struggling to have time for learning alongside this.²⁹
- > Remote learning is not sufficient for many courses which are very practical, rely on specialist equipment or where businesses have had to close e.g. hair salons. Apprentices on bricklaying, plumbing and plastering courses said they were limited to the theoretical side while at home.
- > Remote learning is not a viable solution for disadvantaged learners who often come from areas of high deprivation. Many do not have the technology and/or cannot afford the data to learn from home.
- > Some training providers have reported that their apprentices are less equipped to motivate themselves and access learning without close support and mentoring. This is unsurprising – lots of apprentices choose vocational learning precisely because they are not suited to desk-based learning. One apprentice explained that he has dyslexia so finds it harder to learn at home without support.

For each of these situations, if continuing with learning becomes too challenging, the apprentice may be put on a break in learning. This currently means that funding will be stopped until they resume their learning, which may be detrimental for the training provider, as outlined below.

Income and instability

Redundancy has stripped some apprentices of their incomes³⁰ and further redundancies are predicted when the furlough scheme comes to an end, despite relief about the scheme’s extension to October. New measures are in place to help redundant apprentices complete their apprenticeships, including extended timeframes to find new employers³¹ However, this will not guarantee security for everyone, especially less advanced apprentices. Even when businesses do start to reopen, it is unlikely that they will be operating at the same capacity as before, and have as much scope for apprentices. Some businesses will have to make tough decisions about who to allow into the building to reduce overall capacity. Redundancy fears are further complicated by the fact that employment opportunities for

²⁹ This issue and others below have been raised in discussions with AoC and in provider comments in AELP survey: <https://www.aelp.org.uk/media/3631/covid-19-impact-aelp-survey-intital-results-250320.pdf>

³⁰ They are not eligible for any government-funded support packages. Parents are able to apply for Child Benefit however this will take time to be processed.

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-programme-response/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-apprentices-employers-training-providers-end-point-assessment-organisations-and-external-quality-assurance-pro>

young people in general are being depleted, with recent analysis from the IFS showing that under-25 year olds are 2.5 times more likely to work in a sector that has now shut down.³²

Economic insecurity also has serious repercussions on wellbeing, both on the short and long terms.³³ Apprentices may feel pressure to find a new position at a time when recruitment is flatlining. Some will be worrying whether their role or training provider will still exist by the time life returns to normal. Others may lose direction because they have to take up employment in a completely different sector. For some, instability is the hardest part:

“Just being in the dark, it’s like, none of us know what’s happening... with jobs, with college, with money. It’s just like being off for summer holidays again, not knowing when it’s going to end” – male apprentice, age 17.

Future learners

Covid-19 impacts not only current learners but many young people expecting to start in September and beyond. The AELP has reported a ‘crash’ in apprentice starts already and that 60% of employers have stopped all new apprenticeship starts since the pandemic began.³⁴ If we take March to October 2019 as a point of reference, which saw 67,820 apprenticeship starts from under 19 year olds³⁵, this equates to thousands of apprentices not getting started. Some areas of the country will be hit harder than others, given the disparity in apprentice starts across regions, with 100 in Rutland in Q2 2019/20 compared to 6,170 in Hampshire.³⁶

Post Covid-19, there will be a backlog of apprentices whose training urgently needs to be completed yet fewer employers and training providers available to make this happen. Current apprentices may therefore get less support in completing their apprenticeships and those wishing to transition to higher apprenticeships (e.g. from Level 2 to Level 3) are likely to encounter delays. It will also bring the youngest cohort of aspiring young apprentices to a standstill, with this year’s school leavers facing a dangerous expanse of inactivity between the summer and starting their next stage of learning. As yet there is no strategy for how to tackle this break in learning, despite gaps in learning often be a trigger for young people to lose motivation and drop out.

After years of progress in reducing the number of young people who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) which has fallen steadily since 2011³⁷, delays to, and reduced take-up of, apprenticeships seriously threatens this progress.

³² <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14821>

³³ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/multiple-scarring-effects-of-youth-unemployment/>

³⁴ <https://www.aelp.org.uk/news/news/press-releases/apprenticeship-starts-falling-off-a-cliff/>

³⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships>

³⁶ Apprenticeship starts by Local Authority since May 2010 (Q4 2009/10 to Q2 2019/20): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships>

³⁷ The percentage had been gradually decreasing since the latter half of 2011 but relatively flat since the beginning of 2017 and risen slightly in 2019: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/november2019>

Financial relief not going far enough

The government's current position on funding means that not all providers can access financial relief to protect their apprentices. In good news, new financial support is now available for some organisations which meet all the criteria outlined in the guidance³⁸. Significantly, this relief only is only eligible to non-levy organisations which do not fund apprenticeships via the employer levy introduced in 2017.³⁹

The financial situation for levy-paying providers however remains problematic. If their apprentices have a break in learning for more than 4 weeks, funding will not be paid⁴⁰. This puts some training providers at risk of collapse because many do not have the financial reserves to cover the time they are not receiving any funding.⁴¹ While there are other forms of support available, many are struggling to get loans from the Treasury to stay afloat.⁴²

As it stands, a quarter of providers predict that their chances of survival are less than 50% unless they receive a stronger support package.⁴³ Some providers are taking drastic measures to save their businesses such as furloughing the majority of their staff. Sadly the cost of this is shouldered by current apprentices who therefore cannot get support from them during this time, even if they are at a crucial point in their learning.

³⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/esfa-post-16-provider-relief-scheme>

³⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-levy/apprenticeship-levy>

⁴⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-programme-response/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-apprentices-employers-training-providers-end-point-assessment-organisations-and-external-quality-assurance-pro>

⁴¹ Providers are being referred to apply for other help such as loans under the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, however this is not realistic for many providers with very little financial security right now who cannot provide any guarantees to the banks.

⁴² <https://www.aelp.org.uk/news/news/press-releases/apprenticeship-starts-falling-off-a-cliff/>

⁴³ <https://www.aelp.org.uk/news/news/press-releases/training-providers-working-miracles-to-preserve-apprenticeships-and-other-skills-programmes-but-living-on-borrowed-time-latest-aelp-covid-19-impact-survey-shows/>

Recommendations

The Children's Commissioner is calling for the following actions to protect apprentices both now and in years to come:

1. A coordinated strategy around apprentice relocation for those who lost their apprenticeships, to make sure their hard-earned work to date is not wasted. This should look at ways of stimulating demand for apprentices across all sectors but specifically in those worst affected. It should also consider support for children leaving school and alternative provision this year who may wish to start apprenticeships, and other vulnerable groups including care leavers.
2. Apprenticeship funding needs to be available to all providers who need it, in advance rather than in retrospect. This needs to cover the period while business are restricted. Many providers will need another funding injection once businesses return to normal to extend their programme delivery where delays have occurred. This funding is needed to ensure that all apprentices finish their programmes including those who may have previously been with a different training provider.
3. On-going publication of key data beyond apprentice starts to include completions and breaks in learning broken down by age and level. This recommendation follows the DfE decision to suspend publication of certain data on further education and apprenticeships for quality reasons.⁴⁴ It is crucial that there is publicly available data on how many apprentices are affected and how so that this can feed into the wider strategy on retaining and boosting apprentice numbers. This needs to be done sensitively so that training providers do not feel unfairly identified for changes to their numbers because of Covid-19.
4. Continual review of what further flexibilities are needed, particularly in relation to conducting EPAs and extending learning timeframes, to ease the backlog of completions while supporting those who are still in the system.

⁴⁴ The DfE will continue to publish 'headline data' such as apprenticeship starts but is seeking feedback on what other data needs to be provided: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/announcements/apprenticeship-and-levy-statistics-may-2020>