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Addressing Inequality in Apprenticeships: Learners' Views

January 2009

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Executive summary

In response to the finding from *World-class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All* (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, January 2008) that not everyone benefits equally from the opportunities presented by Apprenticeships, the Learning and Skills Council commissioned ECOTEC Research and Consulting, an independent research organisation, to explore the reasons why. This research was based on a series of 10 focus groups with over 100 learners who are either underrepresented in the Apprenticeship programme as a whole or underrepresented in certain sectors.

The overall outstanding finding from the focus groups was that issues concerning underrepresentation in Apprenticeships are multiple and complex. However, the evidence of underrepresentation within Apprenticeships was acknowledged by apprentices and potential apprentices alike and we came across individuals who have had to tackle subtle forms of discrimination in order to succeed within a specific sector. It was also apparent to participants that barriers to employment at a national level could continue to be barriers at an Apprenticeship level.

It is worth noting that in the discussions both with apprentices and potential apprentices they *infrequently* identified specific factors/barriers relating to their race, disability and gender; this was despite prompting and being in groups that reflected the equality issues under discussion. However, issues concerning equality were more likely to be raised when participants were undertaking an atypical Apprenticeship. Although the sample size was small, we should not be surprised that equality issues were more pertinent for those who were doing atypical Apprenticeships as they were aware that they were 'bucking the trend' and were more likely to be aware of the inequality that existed in their chosen field.

The key findings from the focus groups were as follows.

- Many of the barriers faced by underrepresented groups in employment are replicated in Apprenticeships.
- Apprentices from underrepresented groups face a range of subtle forms of discrimination in accessing and participating in Apprenticeships (paragraphs 30 to 33).
- Flexibility in the learning structure is particularly important to apprentices with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (paragraph 43).
- Families from some black and minority ethnic backgrounds have negative perceptions of the status of Apprenticeships, but are supportive when they understand the benefits (paragraph 47).
- Information, advice and guidance (IAG) is essential in assisting underrepresented groups to participate in Apprenticeships, but its quality varies greatly and there were very few instances of individuals being encouraged to undertake gender-atypical Apprenticeships by an IAG provider (paragraphs 53 to 61).

Introduction

1 According to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills' (DIUS) report *World-class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All* (published in January 2008): 'although Apprenticeships are popular, disappointingly, not everyone benefits equally from the opportunities they offer.' In particular, there is significant gender stereotyping by sector, while black and minority ethnic and disabled apprentices are underrepresented.

2 ECOTEC Research and Consulting, an independent research organisation, was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to undertake a series of focus groups with learners who are either underrepresented in the Apprenticeships programme as a whole or underrepresented in certain sectors. Taking into account demographic factors, they were asked to conduct the focus groups in the following regions: the West Midlands, London and the North West.

3 Findings from these focus groups with different types of learners will provide the LSC with a better understanding of:

- the perceptions of apprentices in different business and industrial sectors;
- attitudes among different groups of learners and non-learners;
- specific issues concerning equality and diversity in work and in training;
- areas in which employers and training providers need to work harder to ensure equality; and
- perceptions and attitudes that need to be tackled.

Background

The role of the Apprenticeships programme

4 The Government's plan to expand Apprenticeships was outlined in *World-class Apprenticeships*. That document explains that, within the context of the new participation age, there will be an entitlement to an Apprenticeship place for each suitably qualified young person from 2013. To deliver this, and in response to Lord Leitch's recommendation (in *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*, published by HM Treasury in December 2006) to increase the skills of those who have already completed their compulsory education, the number of 16- to 18-year-old apprentices will increase significantly by 2013.

5 The Government's strategy outlines plans to:

- protect the Apprenticeship brand;
- define the Apprenticeship experience; and
- enhance the quality of the Apprenticeship experience.

6 A National Apprenticeship Service will be established and there will be investment to raise the profile of the Apprenticeships programme.

7 In *World-class Apprenticeships*, a clear commitment is made to address inequality through a range of actions, including putting in place positive measures and encouraging those underrepresented within Apprenticeships to move into 'atypical' areas. The strategy states that pilots will be established to drive a 'critical mass' of underrepresented learners at certain sites in order to encourage more applications from such groups. To support the take-up of Apprenticeships by underrepresented learners, the document outlines the intention to use 'super-mentors' to support them through their Apprenticeship experience.

8 Lord Leitch's report highlighted the challenges that the UK faces with globalisation. There is recognition of the important role of Apprenticeships in providing a potential route into skilled, well-paid, quality jobs. However, a range of key national organisations concerned with equality issues, as well as the Government's own policy statements, have shown deep-seated concerns about the persistent inequalities that remain with regard to the numbers of certain groups within Apprenticeships.

Underrepresentation within Apprenticeships

9 The LSC identified gender, race and disability as equality strands that required particular consideration within this study. However, the LSC also wanted members of the focus groups to be mindful of other equality issues such as age, sexual orientation and religion.

10 To provide context to the study and help inform the design of the focus groups and the research tools, ECOTEC Research and Consulting conducted a short review of the research literature exploring the theme of inequality in Apprenticeships. It was beyond the scope of the project to conduct an in-depth, systematic review. Notable findings from the review in relation to the target groups for this study shown below.

Gender

11 The Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University completed a 'Rapid review of Research on Apprenticeships' on behalf of the LSC in June 2008. The review found that while the participation of females in Apprenticeships had increased, the distribution of female participation across the sectors followed stereotypes. One study in particular found that females taking Advanced Apprenticeships were concentrated in low-paid sectors which could be classified as being 'traditionally' female. A 2005 study into the uptake of work placements reported that although both genders expressed interest in taking part in non-traditional work placements, they were not really encouraged or helped to do so.

12 The research review also highlighted a paper from 2005 by the then Equal Opportunities Commission that identified a number of common barriers for organisations attempting to challenge gender segregation. These included:

- traditional attitudes regarding the job roles of men and women;
- social stereotypes;
- the poor image of some sectors;
- the attitudes of employers; and
- the lack of Apprenticeship places.

Ethnicity

13 In 2006, the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) conducted research entitled *Perceptions of Apprenticeship by minority ethnic learners – making work-based learning work*. The consultation with stakeholders revealed that, in terms of recruitment and selection procedures, trial periods or 'tasters' were proving to be a useful mechanism for achieving a better match between employers and potential apprentices.

14 The authors concluded that, although the providers and employers who participated in the research had made concerted efforts to attract minority ethnic learners, the results were mixed. The initiatives included:

- the development of specialist marketing materials or approaches; and
- outreach work and targeting parents.

15 In terms of the outreach work, the most common strategy was to work with schools. However, the authors established that providers had experienced difficulties in getting into schools to provide information and suggested that a key way to engage more learners from a minority ethnic background would be to involve more employers from similar backgrounds across a range of sectors.

16 The study also suggested that, within some sectors, barriers might exist for learners from certain religious or cultural backgrounds. One example given was the meat-handling element in the food national vocational qualification (NVQ) which was inappropriate for Hindu learners. Key skills were identified as providing an additional challenge for learners for whom English is not their first language.

17 The report's findings suggested that young people from minority ethnic and white groups valued the same elements of the Apprenticeships programme, such as the combination of on- and off-the-job training and the opportunity to earn a wage while training.

18 The report also noted that participants were aware of the equal opportunities procedures in their workplace and did not seem to have experienced any overt discrimination; nor did they have any strong views about the way they were treated in learning and in the workplace.

19 More recently, research has been conducted to take into account a regional perspective. An example of such research was conducted by SHM which was commissioned to undertake a consultation with learners, employers and community groups on behalf of Yorkshire and the Humber LSC. The research concerned the promotion of diversity in work-based learning (WBL) and Apprenticeships (*Promoting Ethnic Diversity in WBL and Apprenticeships: Project Report to LSC Yorkshire and Humber, April 2008*). The young people consulted identified four main barriers that the report summed up as:

- visibility;
- status;
- access; and
- environment.

20 All the young people consulted felt that WBL opportunities were not made visible enough to them.

Learning difficulties and/or disabilities

21 Within the time available for this brief review, it has proved difficult to identify research, similar to that mentioned above, which focuses on the views of apprentices/potential apprentices with a learning difficulty and/or disability. However, evidence such as that cited in the 'Impact Assessment for the Apprenticeships Review Policies, including the creation of the National Apprenticeship Service' (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and DIUS, July 2008) concludes:

When the relative percentages of disabled apprentices in a sector and all disabled workers in a sector are compared across some of the larger frameworks, there is no single trend. Some sectors have a much smaller percentage of disabled apprentices than in the sector workforce as a whole. These include eskills, SEMTA, and SummitSkills. LANTRA and People 1st both have a higher percentage of disabled workers who are apprentices than are in the workforce as a whole.

Methodology and final report

22 This report builds on the emerging themes highlighted in the interim report ('Inequality in Apprenticeships') and brings together analysis of all 10 focus groups.

23 To ensure that we spoke to the desired target cohorts, the different focus groups concentrated on specific equality strands (race/ethnicity, gender and disability), while still acknowledging that equality issues such as age and gender would cut across all groups.

24 ECOTEC organised 10 focus groups which met between 22 August and 4 September 2008. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the members of the focus groups.

25 Overall, the study engaged with over 100 potential and actual apprentices across the 10 focus groups. Although most participants were aged between 16 and 24, a minority were from older age groups.

26 The focus groups were conducted using a topic guide agreed by the LSC and facilitated by experienced senior consultants or associate directors from ECOTEC.

27 Because the focus groups were likely to tackle sensitive issues, including perceptions of individuals' own educational achievements, their parents' view and matters relating to stereotyping, ECOTEC ensured that the focus groups used a series of interactive techniques designed to secure individual and group ownership of discussions. Methods included 'force field' analysis to identify positive and negative perceptions and experiences of Apprenticeships, 'dartboards' to identify influences and barriers to undertaking Apprenticeships, and voting to understand which factors were the most important to individual participants and the group as a whole.

28 The rest of this report brings to light the findings from the 10 focus groups and includes the following:

- the themes that emerged from the focus groups;
- the equality dimension; and
- the issues that require further consideration and exploration.

Table 1: Breakdown of the focus group members

Group composition		Area
1	Black and minority ethnic (BME) apprentices	North West
2	Potential BME apprentices	West Midlands
3	Apprentices with a learning difficulty	North West
4	Potential apprentices with a learning difficulty and/or a disability	London
5	Female apprentices in 'atypical' apprenticeships	North West
6	Male apprentices in 'atypical' Apprenticeships	North West
7	Female apprentices in 'typical' Apprenticeships	West Midlands
8	Male apprentices in 'typical' Apprenticeships	London
9	Potential female apprentices	West Midlands
10	Potential male and female apprentices	West Midlands

Emerging themes

29 The overall outstanding finding from the focus groups was that issues concerning underrepresentation in Apprenticeships are multiple and complex. What has been striking is the enthusiasm with which learners engaged with the research and told their stories. In addition, providers were keen to promote the research to their learners, suggesting that there is an appreciation of the importance of this study.

Tackling subtle forms of discrimination

30 The evidence of underrepresentation within Apprenticeships was acknowledged by apprentices and potential apprentices alike and we came across individuals who have had to tackle subtle forms of discrimination in order to succeed within a specific sector.

31 In one case a young black male who was undertaking a childcare Apprenticeship found that he had to contend with employer comments such as, 'This is where we put our handbags; obviously you won't use this area' and 'You won't want to join our [colleagues'] girls' talk'. He was also left to face parental scepticism about why a man was working in a nursery with children.

32 In another focus group, male apprentices stated that they would welcome female apprentices on a male-dominated course as it would 'give them something to look at'.

33 It was also apparent to participants that a barrier to employment at a national level would also be a barrier at an Apprenticeship level: for example, disabled apprentices found it particularly difficult to find employment and were concerned that this would be the case when looking for a work placement. A hearing-impaired potential apprentice expressed concern that he might not have access to a sign-language interpreter when in a work placement, which would have a major impact on his ability to pursue an Apprenticeship option.

34 The following sections of this chapter focus on the three key areas discussed within the focus groups:

- 1 What were the positive influences on choosing an Apprenticeship?
- 2 What were the barriers to becoming an apprentice?
- 3 What were the perceptions of Apprenticeships – both prior to becoming an apprentice and subsequently?

Positive influences on choosing an Apprenticeship

35 Participants were asked to identify positive influences supporting their decision to become an apprentice.

Knowledge of Apprenticeships

36 Participants frequently cited their desire to make informed decisions about their career and learning progression and therefore knowledge of Apprenticeships was essential. Participants generally became aware of Apprenticeships through friends/relatives who had previously been an apprentice, a local training provider, Connexions and, interestingly, through their current employer. This implies that the route to Apprenticeships was diffuse. What should be noted is that few of the apprentices had been made aware of Apprenticeships through their school, which tended to promote further or higher education or encouraged them to re-sit exams.

37 Participants felt that their decision to become an apprentice was an 'informed one'. In most cases there was a clear activity trail in choosing to become an apprentice, including finding out more information about what it would involve and talking directly with prospective employers.

The application process to become an apprentice

38 Participants frequently found learning providers helpful in supporting them to apply for an Apprenticeship. Many reported that once they had decided to apply for an Apprenticeship, the college provided additional information about the Apprenticeship selected and the level of coursework required. Colleges also supported applicants to complete the necessary registration forms.

39 Members of one focus group also referred to an employer's own diversity team as having a positive influence in settling in and retaining apprentices on their programmes. It should be noted that this was a large public sector employer that was able offer such a service.

40 Some participants did not see Apprenticeships as any more discriminatory than other aspects of society and did not perceive discrimination as a barrier to their undertaking of one.

A different form of learning

41 Many of the participants had not enjoyed school and felt that it had not catered to their needs. The practical nature of 'on-the-job training'/'hands-on learning' was highlighted as extremely important and a key influencer for many participants.

42 Tailored support for individual needs was also an important factor in choosing an Apprenticeship, with many citing the appeal of the flexible approach taken by assessors and tutors.

43 The flexibility of the learning structure was particularly important for some disabled apprentices who required adjustments and/or individualised learning programmes. The focus group secured evidence of such approaches being taken, with apprentices quoting that they had received additional support from the training organisation when required. For example, there were cases where assessors visited apprentices with a learning difficulty to read out questions so that the apprentice could answer questions verbally rather than undertaking a written test which would have placed them at a disadvantage. It was also felt that the extra support meant that apprentices did not get disheartened.

Financial implications

44 A key positive influence was the attraction of earning while accumulating valuable work experience and simultaneously studying for a qualification. Bringing in a wage was both a 'push' and 'pull' factor. Some of those who lived in their parental home stated that in order to do so they needed to 'pay their way', pushing them into a work setting. The opportunity to earn money while getting qualifications to achieve subsequently higher salaries had also encouraged/pulled people into Apprenticeships.

45 There was a positive response from participants to the increments in pay as a learner progressed through their Apprenticeship programme. They argued that the increments in pay gave an added value to the programme and incentivised their continuing participation on the course and their quest for further achievement. These increments gave the participants a sense that they were developing on a clear path of career progression.

Parental influence

46 For some participants, family was a key positive influence. This was especially the case for those whose family members had direct experience of Apprenticeships and could visualise not only the potential success of the Apprenticeship route but also provide valuable work placement opportunities. Some participants also felt pushed into making a positive career choice by their parents; however, several participants referred to a generic desire of parents who insisted that 'they did something' but who then were apathetic about the choices made by their son/daughter.

47 One theme that was prevalent among some participants from BME groups was that families could be an important supportive influence, but only if they were sold the benefits of Apprenticeships. Some families were worried that Apprenticeships were exploitative and inferior to A-levels and university; however, once parents had a better understanding and saw examples of success within the Apprenticeship route they were much more amenable to it.

Employment prospects

48 The perceived and actual availability of employment during and after the Apprenticeship was a key positive influence for many participants. Some apprentices noted that they could do their Apprenticeship and subsequently secure career opportunities in family-owned businesses; for example, one learner stated: 'I chose to do a mechanics Apprenticeship because my uncle owns a garage.' Others chose to undertake an Apprenticeship in a sector where there was a perceived need; for example, participants felt that childcare and car mechanics would always be required: 'It's a good trade. Not everyone's going around saying "I'm a mechanic"... but everyone has a car.'

49 Some apprentices felt that an Apprenticeship offered the best route into their chosen career. This was particularly the case when there was a close link between the employment sector and Apprenticeship training; for example, participants felt that they would not be able to make it as a hairdresser without completing an Apprenticeship. Similarly, in other sectors such as childcare, a recognised NVQ level that could be attained through an Apprenticeship was a well-recognised requirement.

50 Where a sector had a positive tradition for being aligned to Apprenticeships, participants felt that they gained a trade that carried some prestige; for example, becoming a mechanic.

51 Apprenticeships were seen to be positive in an ever-changing work environment: 'In college you just get qualifications, but jobs are changing – now you need experience'; 'When the Apprenticeship finishes, the £80 is gone but the experience is still there.'

Barriers to becoming an apprentice

52 We asked participants to identify the barriers that they had to overcome in order to become an apprentice.

The availability of information, advice and guidance (IAG)

53 A common theme from the focus groups was the lack of detailed and up-to-date information about Apprenticeships.

54 Few participants had been made aware of the range of different subjects available under the Apprenticeships programme.

55 The quality of the information made available through Connexions varied greatly. While some participants reported receiving a comprehensive service from their Connexions' personal adviser, others stated that advisers had failed to provide details about the scope and potential benefits of the Apprenticeships programme. Some participants went as far as to say that Connexions preferred to promote college courses rather than Apprenticeships, because it was a more straightforward enrolment process and quickly got young people 'off their books'. Apprenticeships, on the other hand, required applicants to find work placements, a process which could be difficult and time-consuming.

56 Participants undertaking an Apprenticeship within an atypical sector, such as women in engineering, stated that to make such a choice away from the mainstream was more about individual decision-making than influence from training providers, school or Connexions. It should be noted that, throughout the study, there were very few incidences of individuals being encouraged to undertake gender-atypical Apprenticeships by Connexions or any other IAG provider.

57 The focus group that contained potential apprentices with a learning difficulty and/or disability was particularly dismissive of the support received from Jobcentre Plus. Participants felt that the emphasis was not on continuing training in areas of interest, but on forcing the participants to take any job so that they could be removed from benefits.

58 Some felt that there was a lack of specialist information and advice for participants who were aged 25+ regarding Apprenticeships. Potential apprentices who were 25+ were confused about where they would find such advice and whether it would encompass issues that were more pertinent to them, such as advice about benefits for parents that could be claimed to make an Apprenticeship a viable financial option.

Information, advice and guidance in schools

59 Many participants stated that their school had provided pupils with an understanding of the Apprenticeships programme. Participants frequently stated that schools focused on more traditional routes of learning and career development, such as A-levels and university. In fact, some felt that schools prioritised re-sitting exams over Apprenticeships. Participants therefore questioned the degree to which schools valued vocational learning, identifying it as a 'watered down' qualification.

60 It was reported that a school's inability to value Apprenticeships particularly affected pupils who found 'book-based' learning difficult and/or had a learning difficulty. Some participants stated that their school regarded pupils who chose a vocational learning option as inferior to those undertaking more academic learning routes. There was a perception that only those with the lowest grades were given the option to undertake an Apprenticeship.

61 Of those participants who did receive information about Apprenticeships from their school, some reported that it was biased towards gender-typical sectors; in one instance this resulted in a participant who had taken an atypical route feeling unsupported. However, although they were critical of schools, focus group participants questioned the impact that schools could have on influencing career decision-making and challenging learning and career stereotypes. The reasons given included:

- most attendees had left school at age 16;
- pupils were still seeking to understand their own identities and rarely wanted to deviate from peer/family expectations; and
- many had not had a good experience of school and therefore were not receptive to any messages that emanated from teachers.

Financial implications

62 For those straight out of school, the salary attached to their Apprenticeship was seen as attractive. However, it appeared that this feeling could be relatively short-term and was more relevant to younger learners. The reasons for this included:

- Where Apprenticeships were not aligned to progressive career paths, learners questioned getting paid £80. They stated that friends were paid substantially more for working in low-skilled employment at the minimum wage.
- Older potential apprentices were perceived to have more financial commitments and therefore were less likely to be able to live on £80 a week.

- The £80 weekly payment was deemed to be particularly low when travel costs/time to work and college were taken into account. In one instance this affected a learner's decision-making as he needed a course and an employer that were both local to him and was unable to find ones covering his desired subject.

The inability of Apprenticeships to offer a truly alternative form of learning

63 While many apprentices identified vocational learning as a factor that encouraged them to undertake an Apprenticeship, others reported that they were not aware that there would be so much 'written work' and this came as a bit of a shock at interview. This resulted in some questioning the degree to which an Apprenticeship truly offered an alternative to more academic-based learning. The amount of written work required within an Apprenticeship was emphasised by those with low levels of literacy, including one participant who was not confident about their ability in English.

64 There was a concern that the vocational-based learning style of an Apprenticeship could be a barrier for some disabled people who felt that they required the more structured support delivered through a classroom-based course. They questioned the ability of employers/learning providers to offer the same level of personal support within the work setting.

Employer perceptions and behaviour

65 Participants were aware of issues concerning the availability of employers willing to take on apprentices and the impact that this had on Apprenticeships. Those within certain employment sectors who had to find their own work placement found it extremely difficult and time-consuming. In some instances, colleges helped in tackling this barrier by supporting learners to find a placement.

66 When finding a work placement, at least one participant reported that employers could behave in a discriminatory manner, which in some instances made them feel vulnerable. This was particularly highlighted when someone wanted to enter an atypical career.

67 Disabled potential apprentices pointed to the fact that developing the required skills had limited impact on their chances of getting a job and questioned the ability of Apprenticeships to challenge this situation. Some disabled people who took part in the focus groups had been encouraged to undertake particular qualifications in order to gain employment, but the achievement of these qualifications had not resulted in any job offers: 'The employer says you have to have qualifications but [once you attain the qualifications] they don't offer you a job 'cos they think you're going to be bored and be over-qualified.' The poor employment experience of some disabled people resulted in them being concerned about both finding a placement and subsequent employment after the Apprenticeship.

Parental perceptions of Apprenticeships

68 A common barrier was parental disapproval of the Apprenticeship route. Some participants alluded to Apprenticeships not matching up to the aspirations of their parents. Such parents equated their child's success with achieving A-levels and going to university, and Apprenticeships were not perceived to be on a comparable level. Some participants felt that the poor perception among parents stemmed from ignorance:

'I don't think parents realise you get an education. They just think it's a job'; 'Unless they've got the facts there in front of them they don't wanna know'; 'All parents have a thing for uni. When I told them about Apprenticeships they thought I was having a laugh.'

69 Asian members of one focus group highlighted the negative perception of Apprenticeships within their families in which arranged marriage plays a part. Parents wanted to show prospective in-law families that their children have good jobs, and have been to university. Comments included 'For Asian families you need a good job, lawyer, solicitor, doctor...'; [going to university] makes it easier for arranged marriages, [so you can say] "Oh yes, my son's done this"; 'They want you to go to uni, work, then flog you off to some woman.' During the study two potential male apprentices reported serious desires to undertake Apprenticeships but had been deterred by their parents and forced to embark on A-level courses.

Equality issues

70 It is worth noting that in both the discussions about influencers and barriers, respondents infrequently identified specific factors relating to their race, disability and gender; this was despite prompts and being in groups that reflected the equality issues being discussed. However, issues concerning equality were more likely to be raised when participants were doing an atypical Apprenticeship. Although the sample size was small, we should not be surprised that equality issues were more pertinent for those doing atypical Apprenticeships as they were aware that they were 'bucking the trend' and more likely to be aware of the inequality that existed in their chosen field.

Perceptions of Apprenticeships

71 During the focus groups, participants were asked to provide words or phrases that summed up their perceptions of Apprenticeships both before and after engaging with them. Following this task a discussion took place to ascertain whether the statement was positive or negative and to stimulate exploratory discussions within the groups. The two major findings were that, first, people's initial awareness of Apprenticeships was limited and they were ignorant of the complete offering; and, second, that once engaged on an Apprenticeship programme, being treated fairly by the employer who provided their work placement was essential. Figure 1 provides a brief summary of participants' perceptions and experiences.

Figure 1: Perceptions of Apprenticeships

Typical responses before starting an Apprenticeship	
+ Positive responses	- Negative responses
<p>I perceived an Apprenticeship to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'hands on' learning away from the classroom and academic studies; • good for the changing work environment: in college you just get qualifications but jobs are changing now, you need the experience; • a clear career progression in a challenging environment: there's no point in doing something if it's easy; • a chance to learn while earning; • reasonably well paid; • something that I have chosen to do so I should enjoy doing it; and • a bridge to employment and an investment in the future. 	<p>I perceived an Apprenticeship to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • something that was undertaken if you did not have the ability to get into college; • for people who kept getting excluded at school; • a way of getting into only a small number of trades, such as hairdressing and engineering; • only for those under 25; • difficult to access and gain entry – either entry requirements were too high or the application process was too challenging; and • poorly paid.
Typical responses after starting an Apprenticeship	
+ Positive responses	- Negative responses
<p>The experience of doing an Apprenticeship has resulted in me:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being more aware of my own potential; • working towards a qualification within a trade and that makes me feel like a more successful person; • identifying opportunities for further learning and increased earnings; • getting the rewards from hard work and new challenges; • learning outside a classroom; • gaining enjoyment from the work setting; and • no longer being treated like a child. 	<p>The experience of doing an Apprenticeship has resulted in me:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling tired and 'stressed' from the long working hours and coursework; • doing a job where the salary fails to match the level of responsibility: getting paid £2.30 an hour to look after someone's child is not a lot; and • being exploited as a source of cheap labour and not being treated as well as other members of staff.

The equality dimension

72 This section of the report will focus on issues concerning the perception of discrimination and its potential impact on those participants who took part in the focus groups.

73 As noted elsewhere, issues concerning equality and discrimination were an infrequent topic of conversation within the focus groups. This was not a surprise as participants were predominantly young people within a group setting and with limited time. Nevertheless, they provided some illuminating comments which will be explored further under the following headings:

- **Evidence of discrimination:** discriminatory issues highlighted by members of the focus groups.
- **Putting in place reasonable measures:** evidence of reasonable measures implemented to mitigate discriminatory behaviour.
- **Proactive measures:** any activity that moves beyond what is reasonable and seeks to redress inequality through a series of progressive activities, such as mentoring schemes targeted at underrepresented groups.

Evidence of discrimination

74 It should be encouraging to note that in spite of prompting by skilled facilitators and the fact that focus groups were organised on identifiable equality strands, issues of discrimination were not conspicuous within discussions. Even with recognition of the inequalities that exist within Apprenticeships, there was no sense that it was as a direct result of the work of providers.

75 The above statement, however, should not disguise the fact that, while there was little to suggest direct discrimination, there was also a corresponding dearth of evidence with regard to positive measures being adopted to encourage and inform potential apprentices. With the exception of one programme, there seemed to be little or no connection between the participants' entrance to or interest in Apprenticeships and positive measures designed to tackle identified inequality within this key area of learning.

76 As already stated, there was limited evidence from the focus groups of discrimination through the Apprenticeship application process, while receiving training from a provider or within the work setting. Where it occurred it was felt by participants to be largely due to ignorance and ingrained stereotypical assumptions. These are summarised in the following paragraphs.

77 Perceptions of 'typical' apprentices. Learners said that employers might have a particular idea of the characteristics that they are looking for in an apprentice and that this could affect the way that employers respond to 'atypical' apprentices. One apprentice spoke of the different treatment he received from an employer when applying for a job within childcare. This included being told that he would not be able to join in with the 'girls' talk of colleagues' and being made to feel generally uncomfortable. There was also evidence that stereotypes regarding those in 'atypical' careers could result in discriminatory treatment among fellow apprentices, with some male apprentices referring to women on an atypical course in a sexist manner and to men on atypical courses as 'queer'.

78 Appropriateness of Apprenticeships for older people. Many of the people who attended the focus groups perceived Apprenticeships to be a career/learning option that was predominantly available to younger people (under the age of 25). It was beyond the remit of the research to ascertain the extent to which this had an impact on the information provided to older people or the availability of work placements. However, older participants reported that they had little awareness of Apprenticeships whether or not they had been consciously excluded by current information channels.

79 Perceptions of IAG. While learners stated that they did not feel that they had been overtly discriminated against in the information that they received about Apprenticeships, the majority of people who did not know which career/learning path to take received information about Apprenticeship options in typical subjects. It should, however, be noted that participants did not feel that they had been treated unfairly when this occurred.

80 Implementing adjustments. One disabled participant did not think that he would be able to get the adjustments that he required in the workplace (a sign-language interpreter) paid for by the employer providing his work placement. Unless disabled people and employers are aware of their rights and responsibilities in relation to Apprenticeships, disabled people will be less likely to undertake an Apprenticeship or find a placement.

81 Employers' appreciation of qualifications. Younger apprentices stated that they were treated unfairly by employers who failed to respond to their growing level of qualifications. This was particularly the case for sectors that did not have clear routes for career progression; for

example, within the childcare sector several apprentices stated that their employer wanted staff to have only the minimum industry standard of NVQ Level 2. The lack of a clear pay structure aligned to training meant that there was no incentive to upskill further and had resulted in younger but more qualified staff feeling undervalued by older staff who got paid more because of their age but were no more qualified.

82 Characteristics of typical female Apprenticeships.

Some participants were aware that typical Apprenticeships for women were within low-paid sectors and women on typical Apprenticeships were less likely to identify long-term career progression as a reason for undertaking the Apprenticeship. The women did not, however, feel that a legacy of discrimination had had an impact on their decision to work within a typical sector, instead reporting that it was more 'natural' for women to work in specific sectors such as childcare and hair and beauty.

Putting in place reasonable measures

83 Potential and current apprentices identified limited examples of reasonable measures that had been put in place by providers of IAG, trainers and employers to mitigate unfair treatment, inequality and discrimination.

84 The established pathways into Apprenticeships (namely schools, Jobcentre Plus and Connexions), providers of Apprenticeships and employers rarely appear to openly challenge stereotypical images of typical or atypical apprentices or attempt to manage potential unfair treatment or discrimination. For example, a male apprentice doing a childcare Apprenticeship faced ignorance from employers and customers alike that went unchallenged.

85 Two exceptions included an employer who encouraged apprentices to benefit from the support of the internal equality and diversity group; and disabled apprentices who reported that training providers had met their legal responsibility to implement reasonable adjustments to testing procedures.

Proactive measures

86 This section both looks at the evidence of and introduces the possibility for moving beyond 'reasonableness' and undertaking proactive measures to address inequality.

87 Participants were unaware of any proactive measures undertaken by IAG providers, providers of training or employers to address inequality within Apprenticeships.

88 There appeared to be a lack of an overriding message that included attracting potential apprentices, engaging them on Apprenticeship programmes and finding work placements. Individuals therefore experienced different

messages from all agencies and employers throughout the process and none was identified as taking the lead on equality and diversity. For example, neither Connexions nor schools provided additional preparatory support to those undertaking atypical subjects; for example, women moving into the male environment of construction.

89 Focus group attendees were unaware of any positive action that had been undertaken with employers and stated that employers did not appear to have been engaged and encouraged to take a positive approach to addressing equality and diversity in their workplaces. Participants felt that learning providers were not close enough to employers to challenge their perceptions of apprentices in general and ensure that apprentices were not exploited or discriminated against. This resulted in some individuals stating that they felt vulnerable moving into employment when they were underrepresented in the sector and would be challenging stereotypes.

90 Some participants also stated that agencies failed to provide additional resources for people within sectors where they may be underrepresented and could face discrimination/less favourable treatment. This should be a cause for some concern. This study involved talking to vulnerable individuals who come from disadvantaged communities and groups. However, discussions with participants revealed little evidence of apprentices being informed of their rights and what options were available if those rights were transgressed. This issue was highlighted within the focus groups with disabled people, and for understandable reasons as this group was more likely to require reasonable adjustments to be made in their place of work. In addition, giving apprentices information regarding their rights and how they could report harassment or discrimination could be of importance for those apprentices working in atypical subjects.

91 Finally, we were also intrigued by participants' concerns that actually implementing positive measures to ensure more representation in Apprenticeships or atypical Apprenticeships might lead to accusations of favouritism and scepticism about the merits of those who were on the course. Again, this is something that sits within national debates regarding the merits of positive action and whether implementing these measures can actually have an adverse impact on those who are the intended beneficiaries. Given the national agenda for tackling inequalities and promoting a range of positive actions, it will be essential to have a communications strategy

Learners' key messages

92 The main essence of this project was to engage with underrepresented learners and therefore this report will conclude by drawing attention to some of the key messages that were highlighted by them. Where the messages were strong and clear we have written them down as such; however, in addition a series of more subtle but no less important issues were raised. These have also been reflected upon and articulated in the remainder of this chapter.

93 We are mindful that this research was conducted over a short timeframe and with a relatively small sample. It is therefore important to assert that the findings outlined within this report are not representative but provide a snapshot of opinions highlighted by people from groups who face inequality in Apprenticeships.

94 Through analysis of the focus groups it was also apparent that the factors influencing someone to undertake an Apprenticeship were extremely complex encompassing factors such as: age, cultural background, parental expectations and disability.

95 Because of this complexity and the sample size, the report is unable to make hard recommendations to the LSC about how to address inequality in Apprenticeships. It is possible, however, to suggest a number of key headline messages that the LSC may wish to consider. These include:

- the reputation of Apprenticeships;
- the importance of cultural backgrounds;
- Apprenticeships and associated sectors; and
- the potential for challenging assumptions.

The perception of Apprenticeships as a second-class career path

96 As defined in 'Barriers to becoming an apprentice' (paragraphs 52 –70), the status of Apprenticeships was questioned throughout the focus groups and presented a major barrier to undertaking one. Poor perceptions of Apprenticeships were manifested in different ways within different cohorts and the LSC will need to consider how it can best inform these groups.

- **Teachers:** Apprentices frequently referred to schools promoting only traditional academic routes to progression. Participants stated that Apprenticeships were devalued and if learners selected this route they were considered to have failed.

- **Employers:** Some questioned the motives of employers in using Apprenticeships. In particular, some stated that employers saw them as a source of cheap labour. These comments were more likely to be articulated in subject areas with more female apprentices, such as hairdressing and childcare. It should be noted that this was a perception rather than a fact but could none the less impact on views of Apprenticeships and their worth.

- **Parents:** The interest and influence of parents on young people's decision-making varied widely. We came across stories of parents proactively steering their children away from undertaking an Apprenticeship. In particular, these parents were more likely to question the reputation of an Apprenticeship against a degree or A-levels and more likely to be concerned by the limited career options associated with an Apprenticeship.

- **Those from different cultural backgrounds:** The perception of Apprenticeships as a sub-standard qualification was highlighted by those from some ethnic backgrounds. In a minority of cases, young people reflected on the preference for 'professional' qualifications within their community. Perhaps the most stark example of this was when young people who expected to have an arranged marriage stated that an Apprenticeship would make them less desirable to other families and prospective partners when compared with other young people who have A-levels and a degree.

97 The perception of Apprenticeships as a second-class career path could have a particular impact on groups that have experienced a legacy of discrimination, such as women, disabled people and people from BME groups. Such groups may be aware that they/their children require as strong a CV as possible in order to succeed and if Apprenticeships are seen as inferior they will not be identified as an enabler of career progression. The degree to which underrepresentation in the Apprenticeships programme is caused by disadvantaged groups selecting a learning route which they feel will help to mitigate discrimination could be a key issue but would need further exploration.

98 The degree to which it is both reasonable and practicable for the LSC to tackle the perceptions of different groups is variable; many are deep-rooted and cannot be tackled by short-term measures. The following section considers some elements suggested within the focus groups that could be acted upon.

The potential for challenging assumptions

Mentors

99 Participants revealed that the ability to identify with successful role models enabled people to break into atypical subject areas. Men studying hairdressing recognised that there were other men at the top of the profession and they believed that this provided them with the determination to achieve in an atypical subject.

100 It was also suggested that mentors could help tackle some of the cynicism regarding the extent to which Apprenticeships are desired by employers within particular sectors, particularly more professional office-based sectors such as management, accountancy and marketing.

101 The focus groups did not allow for a detailed discussion regarding mentoring and again this is something that needs further exploration. There are debates to be had about the type and location of mentors, for example whether they should be located:

- within the community;
- within learning providers;
- within the employment sector; and/or
- within third sector organisations

Pre-placement

102 Participants suggested that providers should work more intensively with people who wanted to move into employment sectors where they were likely to be underrepresented. This support could include working with a disabled person to ensure that an employer puts into place the reasonable adjustments necessary to allow the person to undertake a work placement. Another participant suggested running workshops for underrepresented groups to help them to respond directly to discrimination; for example, talking to male apprentices in childcare who face the insinuation that all men who work with children are paedophiles.

Provision of information

103 A number of participants were unhappy with the information, advice and guidance available and suggested that there should be a specialised centre where information on Apprenticeships could be obtained: 'You got the college for education, Jobcentres for jobs but where do you go for Apprenticeships?'

104 Other suggestions included utilising different media for promoting Apprenticeships. It should be noted that participants were keen for a website for the Apprenticeships programme but were unaware of the existing information on the internet.

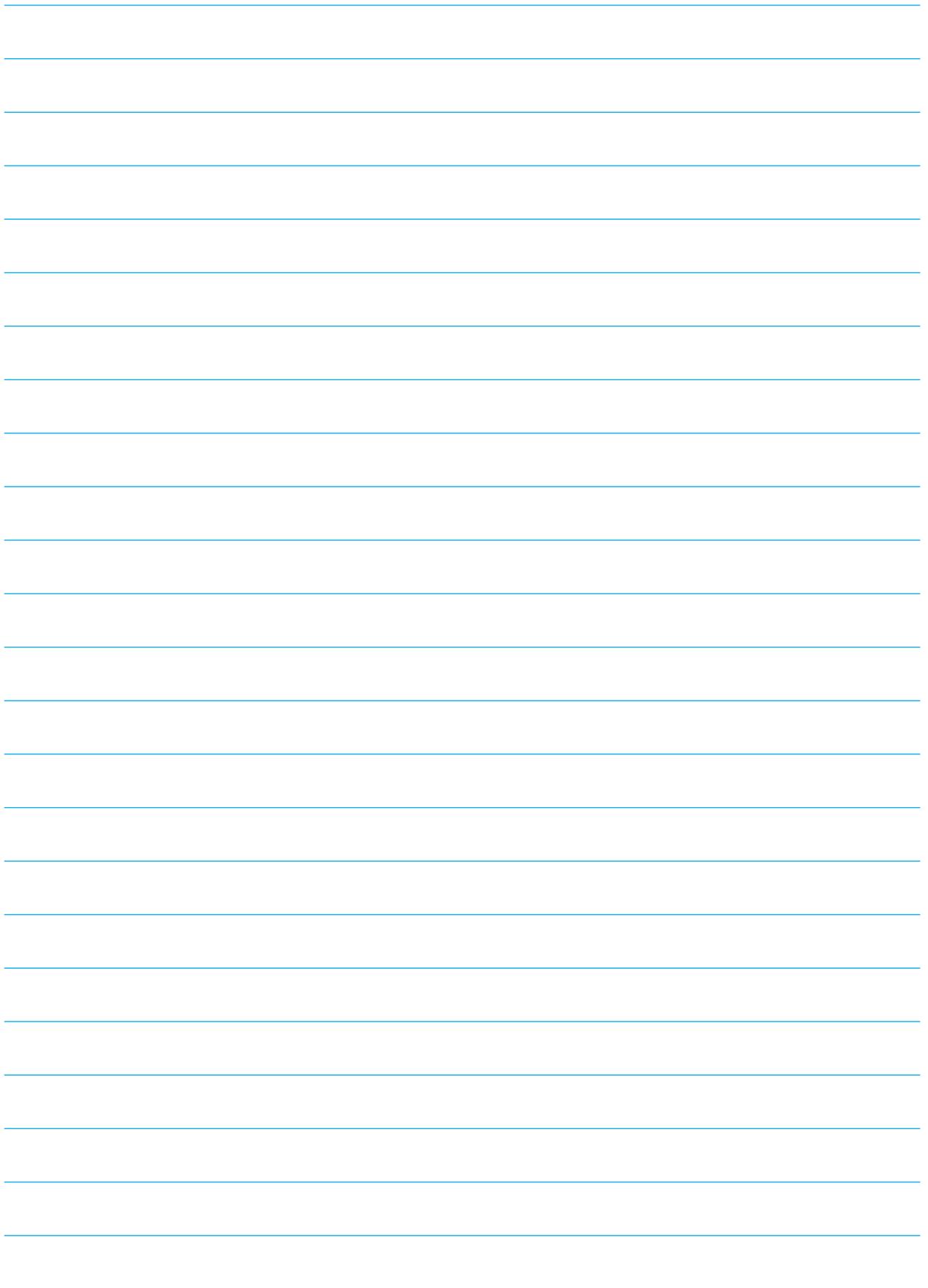
105 The type of information requested included:

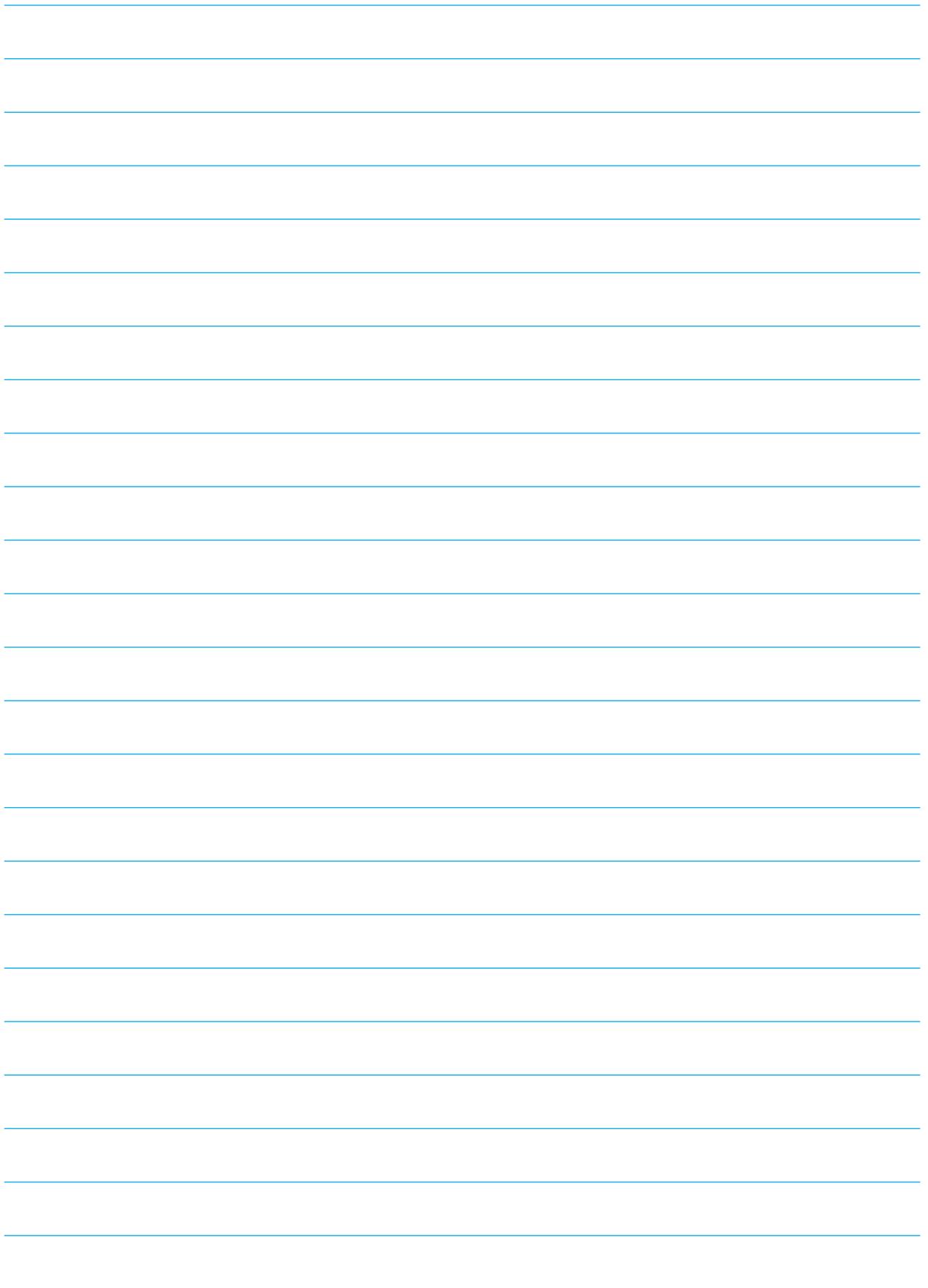
- the Apprenticeship courses available by locality;
- case studies of successful stories, particularly from people with different ethnic backgrounds;
- a comprehensive list of benefits to both employers and learners for undertaking an Apprenticeship programme;
- a database of employment/work placement opportunities;
- tips for securing a work placement; and
- information targeted at parents, which could help alleviate parental concern about Apprenticeships as a 'second-class' route into employment.

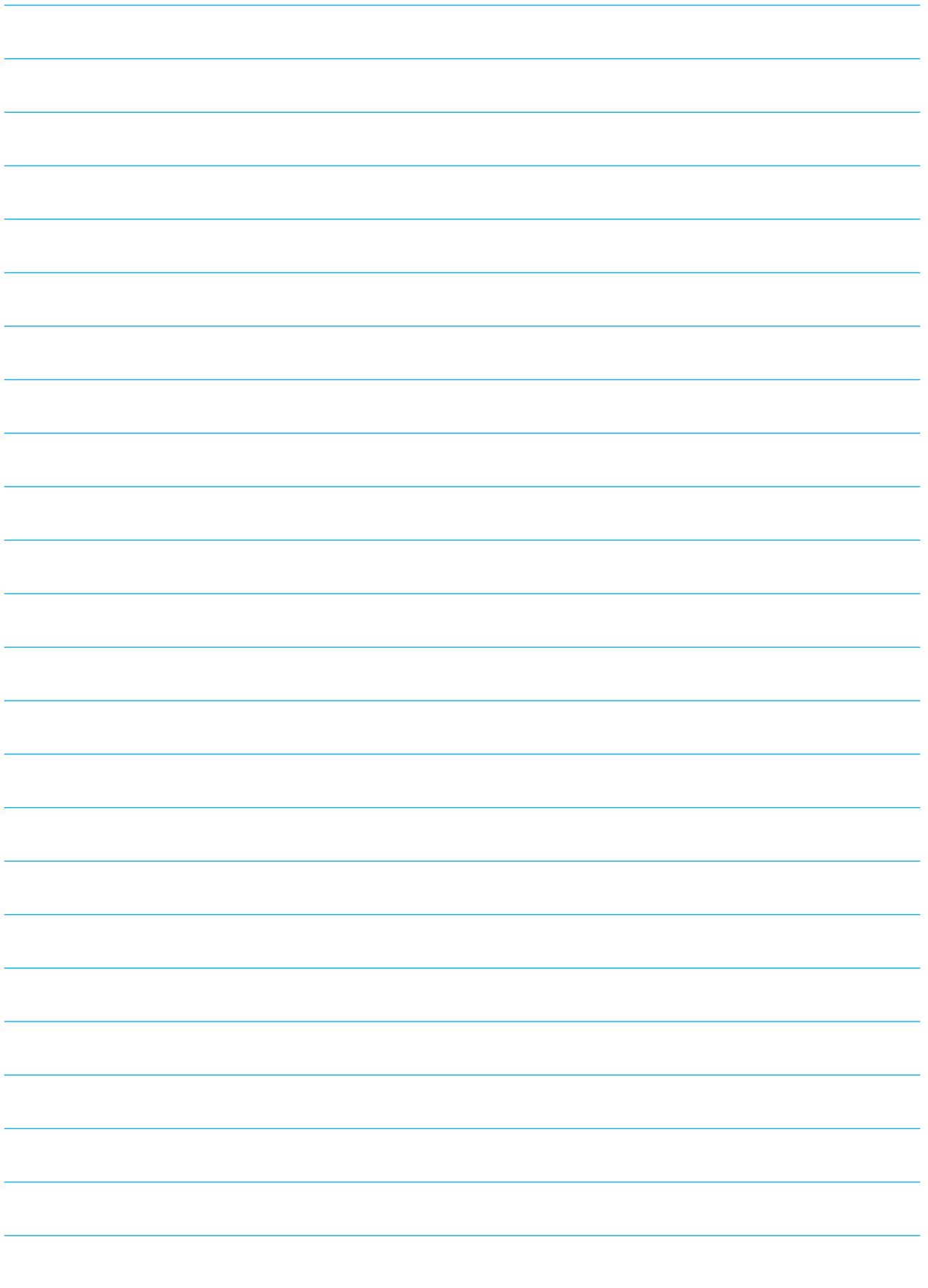
Working with employers

106 Several participants felt that employers engaged on the Apprenticeship programme should be supported to value a diverse workforce and encouraged to challenge the assumptions of existing employees.

107 It was also suggested that all employers should be regularly monitored to ensure that they are not exploiting or acting unfairly towards their apprentices.







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