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Evaluation of the Apprenticeship Vacancies System

September 2009

Of interest to everyone involved in increasing
the number of Apprentices in England

Further information

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This research was conducted by CFE, an independent, not for profit specialist in skills, employment and economic development. Founded in 1997, we provide research and evaluation, programme management and consultancy services to both the public and private sectors. With over 40 dedicated staff, we work on behalf of government departments and agencies, local authorities, colleges and universities. Our experience and unique understanding of the local, regional and national policy landscape enables us to deliver services that are innovative, practical and responsive to the needs of our customers.

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Executive summary

- 1 This interim report presents the findings from the first phase of research for a longitudinal evaluation of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, carried out between April-July 2009. The report draws together findings from primary research with stakeholders and secondary research, and aims to:
 - set the context for how the Apprenticeship vacancies system has been used so far
 - indicate the benefits for early users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system
 - highlight possible improvements and good practice to increase the value of the system to key stakeholders.
- 2 The report also suggests indicative findings on how the Apprenticeship vacancies system may affect overall Apprenticeship engagement, and will be used as a baseline to build fuller findings for the final report, due in March 2010.

Context

- 3 The National Apprenticeship Service, launched in April 2009, delivers an end to end service for Apprenticeships and is responsible for achieving a significant increase in engagement with Apprenticeships over the next decade. A key tool in delivering this service and increasing engagement is a new Apprenticeship vacancies system, which for the first time provides one central web-based location for bringing together learners looking for Apprenticeship places with employers offering them.
- 4 The Apprenticeship vacancies system was launched fully to all users in January 2009, and so the evaluation will cover the first 12 months of the life of the system, with the first phase covering the results from early users of the system.

Key findings

- 5 The following points summarise the key findings of the research across the various user groups:
 - Learners find the site easy to use and useful for finding out and applying for Apprenticeships, and that it serves as a useful introduction to those with limited previous knowledge of this area. However this depends on learners finding desirable and suitable vacancies on the system.
 - Employers that are aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system are happy with the service offered, particularly as an additional advertising route. They see the system as part of their overall approach to engaging apprentices, but

not the sole route. However overall the Apprenticeship vacancies system has not been widely publicised or brought to the attention of employers.

- Learning Providers on the whole value the Apprenticeship vacancies system as an additional means to recruit apprentices, and have had training and are using the system. Providers are assessing how to integrate it into their own systems and processes and have had mixed success doing so. Initial usability issues have made the experience less positive for some.
- Of the other stakeholders, Connexions are most aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and find it a useful source of information to advise learners of Apprenticeship opportunities in their locality. Other stakeholders, including Jobcentre Plus, nextstep, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and schools are much less aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

Conclusions

- 6 Users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system generally agree that the main service benefit of the system is the facility to provide a one-stop-shop for information on Apprenticeship vacancies and facilities to advertise and apply for them. The main issue at present is the lack of Apprenticeship vacancies to meet demand from learners. This creates the risk of disengaging stakeholders, despite the encouraging response to how useful users find the Apprenticeship vacancies system.
- 7 Whilst both learners and employers can see the benefits of a centralised Apprenticeship system, it is not possible at this stage to ascertain whether the introduction of the Apprenticeship vacancies system has increased the amount of Apprenticeship engagement overall. This is due to the existence of other access routes and lack of Management Information from which to benchmark an increase in total numbers applying or being recruited. However this will be understood through the final phase of the project, due to be completed by March 2010.

Recommendations

- 8 The following recommendations are made in the context of the planned improvements to the usability of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and are based on key findings identified through this research. The National Apprenticeship Service should:
 - **Raise employer demand for Apprenticeships and engage employers and providers with the Apprenticeship vacancies system to satisfy the demand for Apprenticeships from learners.** Achieving this may require: a review of the NAS ways of working with Providers and of their contractual obligations, and a commitment to ensure that all NES employers use the system to advertise all Apprenticeship vacancies.

- **Produce targeted marketing to promote Apprenticeships and specifically the Apprenticeship vacancies system aimed firstly at employers, but also at schools, teachers and careers advisory staff.**
- **Secure commitment of SSCs and other employer representative bodies to promote the Apprenticeship vacancies system to their networks.** This could be achieved by providing a high level briefing for SSC partners and other employer representative bodies such as the CBI to promote Apprenticeships and highlight the overall strategy for the system.
- **Provide updates to providers and stakeholders on Apprenticeship vacancies system take up and usage and share Key Performance Indicators.** To provide context that will enable Providers to develop their employer engagement strategies to help increase employers' demand for Apprenticeships.
- **Establish forums for Providers and stakeholders such as Connexions, to review good practice in integrating Apprenticeship vacancies system with existing systems.** Cascade this good practice by producing a good practice guide for providers and other stakeholders.
- **Ensure clear communication between NAS and providers, identifying ways in which providers can provide feedback and input into the ongoing development of the system.** To ensure ongoing provider buy-in to the system.
- **Increase level of NAS engagement with schools, nextstep advisors and youth advisors to both inform them of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and suggest how they can best work to support learners.** Agree ways of working with schools, nextstep advisors and youth advisors.
- **Review and update the content on the Apprenticeship vacancies system.** Consultation suggests that learners require more detailed content on Apprenticeship Frameworks, employers' types and job roles by industry or sector. It would be advisable to involve SSCs in the creation of sector specific information. Providers would also welcome a review of the need for full employer details to be publicised when Apprenticeship vacancies are advertised on the system.
- **Enhance the learner experience of the Apprenticeship vacancies system by making it more personalised and interactive.** Create a discussion forum for learners on the system to share information and answer queries. Explore the potential to expand the Apprenticeship vacancies system text message function.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The LSC's National Apprenticeship Service launched a new Apprenticeship vacancies system in January 2009, as a core part of the Government's strategy for a renaissance of Apprenticeships over the next decade. CFE have been commissioned to undertake an evaluation to understand the benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system to all stakeholders.
- 1.2 This interim report presents the findings from the first phase of a longitudinal evaluation, carried out between April and July 2009. As per the specification for the project, the first phase of the research covers the early users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and is on a smaller scale. The full evaluation will be delivered in March 2010, with the second phase of the research taking place between December 2009 and March 2010.

Apprenticeship vacancies system and the wider Apprenticeships context

The National Apprenticeship Service

- 1.3 The National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) was launched in April 2009, as outlined in the Government's strategy for the future of Apprenticeships, *World-class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All* (January 2009). NAS has responsibility for the delivery of Apprenticeships, and provides an end-to-end service. This includes Employer Services, Learner Services and the web-based Apprenticeship vacancies system.
- 1.4 NAS has responsibility for achieving Government targets for Apprenticeships in England, including:
 - Increasing Apprenticeship take-up, with 400,000 in learning by 2020
 - Making Apprenticeships a mainstream option for young people, with one in five 16-18 year olds to undertake an Apprenticeship in the next decade.
- 1.5 The change in economic context since these targets were first proposed has made achieving them both more challenging but also more important. The Government has shown its continued support for Apprenticeships as a key route for up-skilling and re-skilling the workforce to support the UK through and out of the recession.
- 1.6 The key challenge for NAS is to increase the number of employers offering Apprenticeship places to provide sufficient opportunities to meet the demand from learners. Awareness of Apprenticeships in general is currently being raised by a national marketing campaign featuring the now Lord Alan Sugar.

The target audience for this is largely employers, and aims to encourage them to consider Apprenticeships by highlighting the benefits to their business.

Role and objectives of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

1.7 The Apprenticeship vacancies system sits at the centre of the National Apprenticeship Service, providing the connection point between Employer Services, Learner Services and operational delivery partners such as Learning Providers. It aims to provide a single web-based location for providing up to date information on Apprenticeships and a consistent national system for bringing together employers with Apprenticeship vacancies and potential apprentices.

1.8 The Apprenticeship vacancies system is set up to benefit various groups in the following ways:¹

Learners	Learning Providers	Employers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Act as a one-stop-shop, providing up to date information on Apprenticeships ■ Provide an interactive My Apprenticeship Space for saving information and receiving updates and alerts ■ Provide ability to search and apply for local, regional and national Apprenticeship vacancies ■ Provide ability to track and monitor progress of applications in real time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide a professional and efficient vacancy advertising and matching resource ■ Allow flexibility of involvement e.g. links to own recruitment websites, ability to export candidate application details to enable sifting and integration with existing HR systems ■ Provide an integrated and easy to use system ■ Support achievement of key targets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide free advertising for their positions ■ Act as a one-stop-shop for information and updates on progress ■ Allow flexibility of involvement e.g. links to own recruitment websites, ability to export candidate application details to enable sifting and integration with existing HR systems

Table 1: Expected benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

This interim report

1.9 This report sets out the findings from the first phase of research with early users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, focusing on key stakeholder groups including learners, employers, providers and other stakeholders (e.g. Connexions, nextstep and Jobcentre Plus). The report draws together findings from primary research with stakeholders and secondary desk-based research, to set the context for how the Apprenticeship vacancies system has been used so far and the benefits for early users of the system, and to highlight possible

¹ Taken from project specification, February 2009.

improvements and good practice to increase the value of the system to key stakeholders.

- 1.10 The report aims to provide the latest feedback to NAS and Government on the importance of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, but at such early stages can only suggest indicative effects of the system on wider Apprenticeship engagement. Findings from the first phase of research will be used as a benchmark and built upon in the second phase of research and final report in March 2010.
- 1.11 After this introduction the rest of the report is structured as follows: **Section 2** sets out the method for the research; **Section 3** looks at the take up and use of Apprenticeship vacancies system to provide the context for the report; **Section 4** reviews the benefits and value of the Apprenticeship vacancies system for key stakeholders; **Section 5** sets out examples of good practice in using the Apprenticeship vacancies system thus far; **Section 6** gives indicative findings on how the Apprenticeship vacancies system may influence Apprenticeship engagement; **Section 7** highlights potential areas for improvement and recommendations; **Section 8** outlines key findings and conclusions; **Appendices** include data from the Apprenticeship vacancies system Summary Data and WebTrends Reports and Bibliography.

2 Method

2.1 The research comprised of the following stages:

- **Stage 1:** Desk based research to analyse Management Information (MI) and WebTrends data from the Apprenticeship vacancies system site, and research to identify other web-based Apprenticeship recruitment provision
- **Stage 2:** Depth interviews with 28 key stakeholders, including Connexions, Jobcentre Plus, nextstep, providers and employers
- **Stage 3:** Discussion groups- three groups with providers (in North, South and Midlands) and one group with learners, plus seven one-on-one depth interviews with learners
- **Stage 4:** Online surveys with learners and employers
- **Stage 5:** Analysis of data collected culminating in interim report, presentation of findings and recommendations

Research questions

2.2 The principal aim of the research is to understand the benefits of Apprenticeship vacancies system to all stakeholders. Initially the focus was on stakeholders' views on requirements, usability and successes of the system. However, several of these areas have been covered by studies carried out by S Cool with Apprenticeship candidates and providers.² S Cool's reports in particular covered usability issues such as access to the site, search functions and the design and language of the site.

2.3 The following key research questions were therefore agreed for the project:

- What are the main service benefits to users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system?
- Are there any issues or difficulties with using the system on a general level?
- How has the Apprenticeship vacancies system affected awareness and uptake of Apprenticeships?
- What further support is needed to make better use of the Apprenticeship vacancies system?

²S Cool, 'Candidate Search Project', and 'Candidate and Learning Provider User Group Project Report', (April 2009)

2.4 Within each area, the research focuses on the views of:

- learners
- learning providers
- employers
- additional stakeholders including Connexions, Jobcentre Plus, schools and nextstep

Approach

2.5 The research for the interim evaluation was carried out between April and July 2009. The research was conducted by CFE in conjunction with our fieldwork partner, JRA Research. The following points set out how and what data was collected for each stage and relevant methodological points.

Desk research

2.6 CFE carried out a review of relevant data and information regarding Apprenticeship engagement. This included reviewing monthly Summary Activity Reports of key Management Information (MI) from the Apprenticeship vacancies system, and the CapGemini WebTrends report on site usage. CFE also researched and reviewed alternative web-based provision for advertising and applying for Apprenticeship vacancies, such as general online recruitment sites, employers' own sites, and online services provided by stakeholders such as regional Connexions teams, Sector Skills Councils and other third sector organisations.

Depth interviews

2.7 CFE undertook 28 depth telephone interviews with key stakeholders, each lasting around 30-60 minutes. The interviews were used to collect various stakeholders' views on the use and benefit to them of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, and also to inform the design of the discussion group guides and online surveys. During this phase CFE spoke to nine Connexions staff (one from each region), three nextstep advisors, three Jobcentre Plus staff, five providers, four employers (mainly large employers working with the National Employer Service), and four Sector Skills Council leads.³ Contacts were provided via the regional Apprenticeship vacancies system managers. All participants agreed to be re-contacted for the second phase of the research (i.e. 100% re-contact rate).

Provider discussion groups

2.8 CFE and JRA conducted three two-hour discussion groups in the North, Midlands and South, with between two and four providers at each. The aim of the groups was to explore providers' views on the use and benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Providers also shared good practice in use of the system and made recommendations for improvements to make better use of the system as it stands.

³ SSC leads were from Cogent, Government Skills, Skills for Care and Skills for Justice

Learner discussion groups and interviews

- 2.9 CFE and JRA conducted a two-hour discussion group with learners from the South, and seven one-on-one interviews with individual learners. Learners were recruited via an advertisement on the Apprenticeships website; the geographical disparity of the responses meant that some of the learners took part in one-to-one interviews rather than discussion groups as planned. The discussion groups and interviews reviewed how learners use the site and their views on the benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system.
- 2.10 For the learners taking part in the discussion group and interviews, a third of the respondents were male and two-thirds female. 44 per cent were aged 16-18, 22 per cent aged 19-24 and 22 per cent aged 25 or over. The majority of respondents were from the South (South East and London), plus two learners from the West Midlands and one from the North East.

Learner online survey

- 2.11 All learners who had registered on the system or made an application between 16th May and 23rd June 2009 were sent a short online survey to complete. The survey explored learners' awareness of Apprenticeship vacancies system and Apprenticeships in general, what support they received to use system, and how they found using it. The survey also asked learners' opinions on the benefits of the site, comparing against NAS' expectations of benefits set out at the launch of the system.
- 2.12 489 individuals took part in the Learner online survey. In regards to gender, males (57 per cent) represented a greater proportion of respondents than females (43 per cent). Over half (56 per cent) of respondents were aged between 16 and 18 years old; nearly a third (30 per cent) were aged between 19 and 24 years old; and those aged 25 or older accounted for a further 14 per cent of respondents.
- 2.13 People of white British ethnicity made up the overwhelming majority of learner respondents at 71 per cent. The next largest self-declared ethnic group was Asian or Asian British – Pakistani, with 5 per cent. This was followed by people of Black or Black British – Caribbean origin and whites of any other white background; each of these groups represented 4 per cent.

Employer online survey

- 2.14 The survey asked employers about their awareness of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and Apprenticeships in general, experience of the wider service around the Apprenticeship vacancies system and views on the benefits of the system. The survey was sent to providers using the system since 16th May, who were asked to forward the survey to the employers they work with.⁴ This recruitment technique does raise some methodological points and caveats

⁴ This was necessary as NAS were unable to provide employer contact details directly, as the employers themselves do not register their details on the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

should be taken into consideration when interpreting the data. Since we were unable to track who the survey was sent to, (and therefore monitor the total sample population), results from the online survey of employers will need to be treated as representative only of the survey respondents and not of all employers. We will therefore not be able to generalise from the findings of the employer survey.

- 2.15 In all, 67 employers responded to an online survey for the interim evaluation of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Of these, 57 were aware of the system. Respondents were spread around the English regions. The region (where reported) in which respondents operated the most (11/63) in was the North West, whilst the region which was least represented was the North East (3/63). There was a good spread in terms of types of employer size responding to the survey. Responses were received from employers from Micro (1-9 staff), Small (10-49), Medium (50-249), Large (250-4999) and Macro (5000+) size brackets. Small businesses were the most responsive and accounted for 15 of the 67 respondents. However there were not enough responses for there to be a representative sample of each type of employer. The research for Phase 2 will include a larger sample of employers, allowing for a fuller breakdown of the results by employer type.
- 2.16 Nearly half (28/67) of respondents' organisations were based in the Education sector. This reflects the point that a significant number of those responding to this survey were actually learning providers.⁵ The second largest sector following Education was Human Health and Social Work activities, with 10/67 respondents stating their organisations were based in this sector. The third most reported sector was Administrative and support services.
- 2.17 As the point above reflects, the method for circulating the Employer online survey (i.e. via learning providers) did have some effect on the sample of those who responded. From responses to the survey, it appears that some providers have completed the survey themselves; for some, this is because they act as both the learning provider and the employer of the apprentices, whilst others have completed the survey from their own perspective as a learning provider instead of forwarding it to employers as requested. Therefore the results of the Employer online survey should be interpreted with this in mind.

⁵ Some respondents from the Training and Education sector may also be employers of apprentices themselves, as well as learning providers.

3 Take up and use of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

- 3.1 This section looks at the take up of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, how various users are using the system and how easy they have found it. This provides the context for the following sections of the report, and aims to provide a fuller understanding of how the system is being used and by whom.
- 3.2 Please note that this report will not focus on functionality or recommendations around technical specifications of the system, as these elements have already been covered by the S Cool reports. Following recommendations from these reports, changes to the system have already been drawn up and will be implemented in the next release of the system. Therefore this report will focus on exploring the way in which the system is used in a broader sense.

Apprenticeship vacancies system engagement

Overall levels of use of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

- 3.3 Data from the Apprenticeship vacancies system Management Information (MI) and WebTrends reports show that usage of the site is increasing considerably over time. The number of learners registered on the site has shown significant growth, from 45,148 in March 2009 to 91,218 in June 2009. Between December 2008 and July 2009 the site was visited 479,500 times with an average of 2,603 visitors per day between May and July 2009 (see Appendix A for additional usage information).
- 3.4 As well as an increase in learners registering, there has also been an increase in the proportion (and therefore number) of learners applying for positions. This has increased from 12 per cent of all registered learners to 17 per cent, between March and June 2009 (see Figure 18 in Appendix A).
- 3.5 The number of registered employers with posted vacancies has also increased considerably, but at lower levels. As of June 2009, there were 2608 employers on the system, up from 955 in March 2009. In total, 9,938 vacancies have been advertised on the site up to June 2009. The number of vacancies on the site each month varies, as new vacancies are added and others are filled or pass their closing date. The number of vacancies on offer each month has varied, falling from 4,439 to 3,890 in May, and increasing to 4,375 in June (see Figure 19 in Appendix A).

Vacancies on the system

- 3.6 As Figure 18 in Appendix A indicates, there is a considerable imbalance of supply and demand for vacancies on the site. The number of learners

registering and applying significantly outweighs the number of vacancies on offer.

- 3.7 This has a very real effect on learners using the site; in our interviews both learners and Connexions staff supporting them reported that there are often very few vacancies on offer within the sector and/or region relevant to the learner. Providers too noted that as a result of the scarcity of vacancies available, they have had very high response rates to those Apprenticeships advertised. One provider in the North East reported receiving 237 applications from just 13 vacancies.
- 3.8 This is also supported by findings from the Learner online survey. 34 per cent of respondents (164 respondents) had not yet applied for an Apprenticeship, and when asked why, the most frequently given answer from respondents was that there were no suitable vacancies in the job role they were interested in.

Awareness, marketing and promotion of Apprenticeship vacancies system

- 3.9 Awareness of Apprenticeships in general has been raised by the marketing campaign featuring Lord Alan Sugar. However, there has not been a specific launch of the Apprenticeship vacancies system itself, and current marketing campaigns do not mention it explicitly. Therefore raising awareness of the site amongst all stakeholders has for the main part been led by the LSC's National Apprenticeship Service team. It has then subsequently been filtered out to the networks and partners that the LSC deals with, including providers and other key stakeholders such as Connexions.
- 3.10 The table below outlines the evidence showing how each stakeholder group was first made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system:

Learners

- The most popular way for learner respondents (28 per cent) to first find out about Apprenticeship vacancies system was directly from the Apprenticeships website (www.Apprenticeships.org.uk). What is more, when combining the second most popular method for finding out about the system – by searching the internet via meta search engines (e.g. Google, yahoo etc) – over half of all respondents (52 per cent) used the internet in some form as the means to discover the Apprenticeship vacancies system. This shows how important electronic resources have been in marketing Apprenticeships to potential learners.
- Of the other information sources, a fifth of respondents (20 per cent) had found out about the Apprenticeship vacancies system via the Connexions service. Only 3 per cent of respondents stated that they found out about the system from more conventional media, such as television, radio, press, posters etc. This latter finding reinforces the fact that no specific marketing materials for the Apprenticeship vacancies system have been produced nationally.

Providers

- From the qualitative interviews and discussion groups, all providers were made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system via the LSC. This was either via initial introductory briefings or via training sessions run by regional NAS teams from November 2008 onwards.
-

Employers

- Of the 57 respondents who were aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, 31 stated that they had found out about it from the LSC's National Apprenticeship Service team. Another 15/57 found out about the system from a Learning Provider. See Figure 1.

How did you first find out about the Vacancy Matching Service?

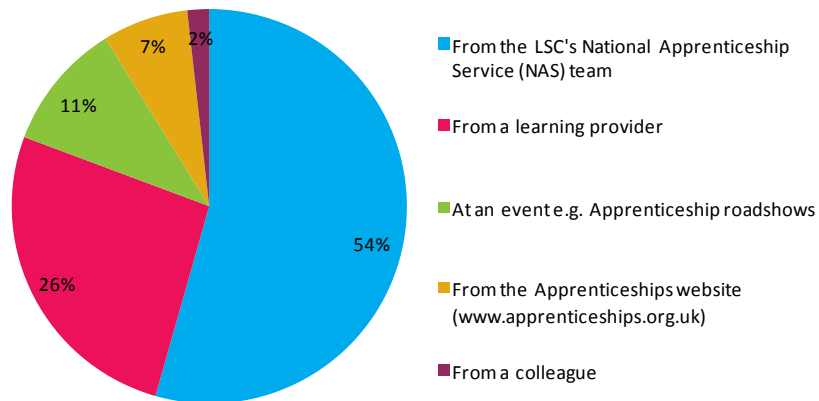


Figure 1: Source, Employer Online Survey (Base 57)

- Evidence from qualitative interviews with employers supports this finding that the main source of information on the Apprenticeship vacancies system is via the LSC's National Apprenticeship Service team, and the events that they have organised.

Other stakeholders

Connexions

- From the qualitative interviews, Connexions staff were made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system via their regional NAS team; some were involved in early stage consultations and development of the system, whilst others received briefings or training sessions from NAS at a later date.

Jobcentre Plus

- Evidence from qualitative interviews suggests that awareness amongst Jobcentre Plus staff is low. Staff working at the national policy level were aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system from LSC briefings or other partnership meetings; however, there has been no systematic roll-out to front line Jobcentre Plus advisors, indicating that those engaging with potential learners and employers are not currently aware of the system.

nextstep

- nextstep staff interviewed were made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system via briefings from NAS, and some were given training sessions from a learner's perspective on using the site.

Sector Skills Councils

- The SSC leads interviewed had found out about the system via the networks they are involved in relating to Apprenticeships, but had not had any briefings or training from NAS.

Table 2: How users were made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

Training

- 3.11 To date, hands-on training has been mainly delivered to learning providers. From December 2008 onwards NAS regional teams rolled out training sessions for providers, including training sessions at the LSC IT training facilities. These sessions were simple half day events and were popular and useful to providers. Other training materials produced and circulated by the NAS team include a user guide for Vacancy Managers (i.e. learning providers), and a user guide for large employers working with the National Employer Service.
- 3.12 The level of training available to providers has varied across the regions; providers in the East Midlands and North East reported that they had access to a number of training sessions, allowing all their staff to attend. However, providers from the South East reported that there were very few training sessions available to them, so that only one or two representatives from their organisation could attend, and they were then expected to cascade what they learned to their colleagues.
- 3.13 Other stakeholders have had varied levels of training, depending on what has been provided by regional NAS teams. Some Connexions staff interviewed had received a full training session for all front line advisors, whilst others had access to limited training for some staff who were then expected to cascade the information to colleagues. In some regions staff had only received limited briefings with no hands-on training.
- 3.14 For the nextstep staff interviewed, a few had received briefings and some training, but were yet to arrange wider training for managers and frontline staff. Similarly for Jobcentre Plus, there has not yet been a wider roll-out of training on the system to frontline staff.

Alternative routes for engaging with Apprenticeships

- 3.15 Alternative routes for finding out and applying for Apprenticeships, which existed prior to the creation of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and may continue to be used, were investigated as part of the research. These frequently are not purely focused on Apprenticeships, but are a part of broader job or training search facilities.
- 3.16 For example, several job listing websites offer some similar features and facilities to the Apprenticeship vacancies system. For example, several websites such as 'Monster' and 'TotalJobs' produce Apprenticeship opportunities during a generic search. However, neither of these services focus specifically on Apprenticeships, and there is no other system that exists purely to list Apprenticeships nationwide.

Alternative engagement routes used by learners

3.17 The results of the Learner online survey indicate that the learners consulted predominantly use the Apprenticeship vacancies system to find out about Apprenticeship vacancies but, in addition, also use alternative routes such as the Connexions service, employers' own websites and by contacting Learning Providers. See Figure 2.

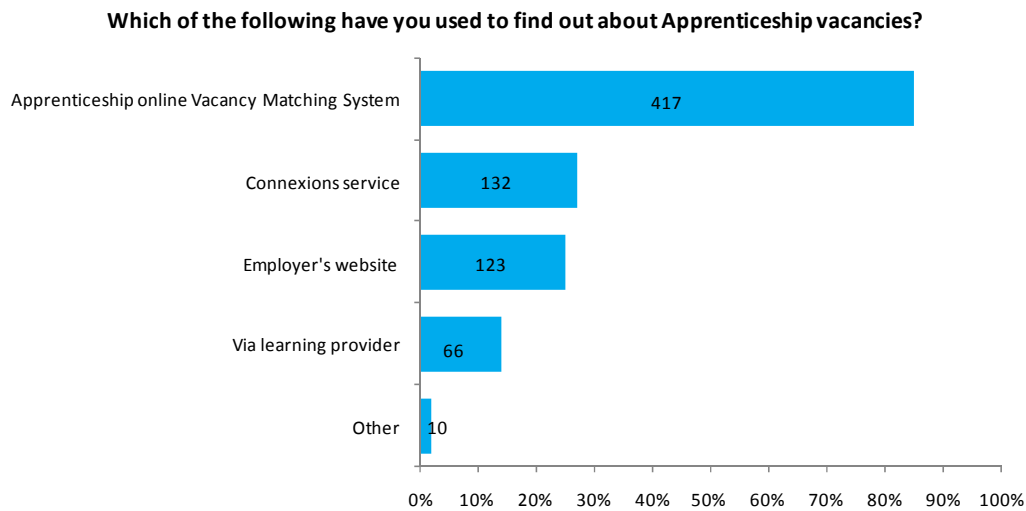


Figure 2: Source, Learners Online Survey (Multiple response question)

3.18 When applying for Apprenticeships, learners responding to the survey also predominantly used the Apprenticeship vacancies system, but also apply via employers' websites, other general online job sites and Connexions service. See Figure 3.

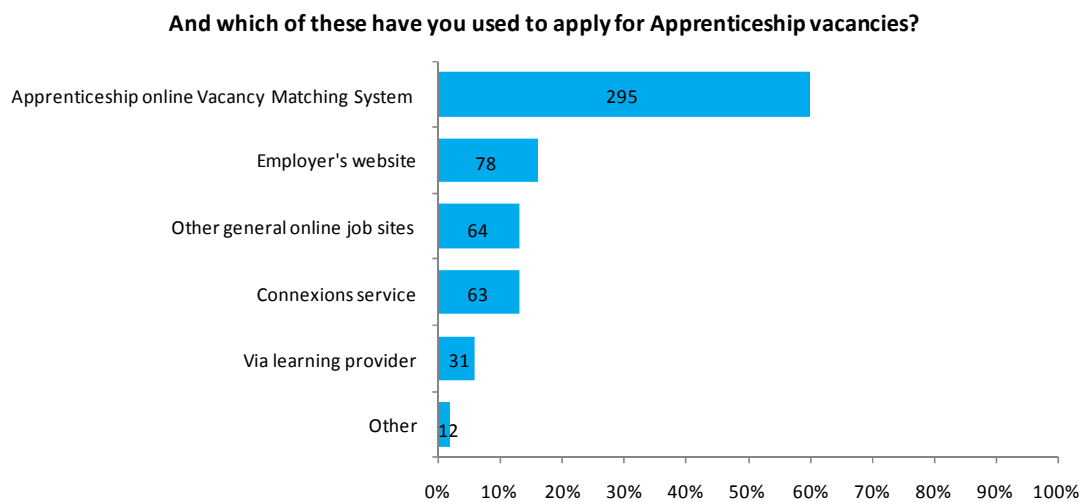


Figure 3: Source, Learners Online Survey (Multiple response question)

Alternative engagement routes used by employers and providers

3.19 Employers and providers also continue to use a variety of means for advertising Apprenticeship places, as well as using the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Respondents to the online survey indicated that they still use their own website, local media and other advisory services' facilities (e.g. Connexions and Jobcentre Plus) to advertise and recruit apprentices. No respondents stated that they 'no longer use alternative routes for advertising and recruiting apprentices', indicating that employers see the Apprenticeship vacancies system as an additional, rather than replacement, tool for advertising Apprenticeships. See Figure 4.

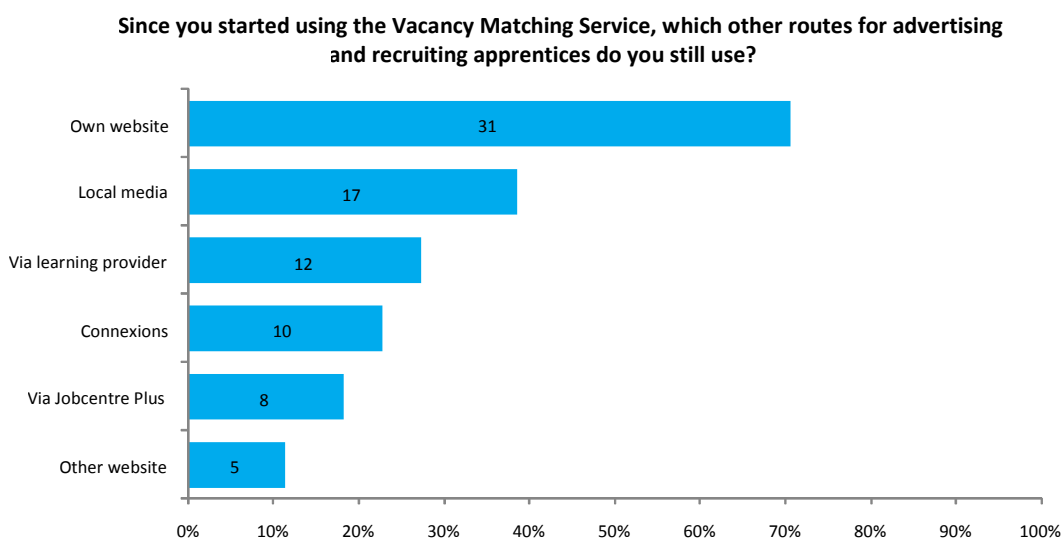


Figure 4: Source, Employers Online Survey (Multiple response question)

3.20 Providers also continue to do a lot of work outside the Apprenticeship vacancies system engaging employers and learners with Apprenticeships. This includes business development activity with employers, open evenings for learners and parents, awareness events with schools, and advertising in local media.

Alternative engagement routes via other stakeholders

3.21 Other stakeholders, such as Sector Skills Councils and Connexions, have varied facilities online with relation to Apprenticeships, including facilities to search for Apprenticeship vacancies in their area. The majority of these sites now direct the user towards Apprenticeship vacancies system, although some of the websites we examined provided separate Apprenticeship search tools. However, these were often limited in scope or volume of vacancies available.

Using the Apprenticeship vacancies system

- 3.22 Before registering, any user can search for vacancies in the system and see the results, displaying headlines about the vacancies available. However, to make full use of the site, users are required to register and are assigned a unique account. As the Apprenticeship vacancies system is used by various different stakeholders, there are various types of accounts according to the type of user registering. The functions and facilities available on each type of account vary; for instance, the functions on a Learner account vary to those available on a Learning Provider account.
- 3.23 From the visitor landing page, users can access either the Learner log-in, Provider log-in or Partner log-in. The table below outlines the main functions available to each type of account:

Learners	Providers	Partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ My Home ■ Message Board ■ Manage Applications ■ My Saved Vacancies ■ My Saved Searches ■ My Alerts ■ Search for Vacancies ■ Search for Learning Provider ■ My Profile ■ Application Form ■ Change Password ■ Help ■ FAQs ■ Logout 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ My Home ■ Manage My Vacancies ■ Vacancy Search ■ Candidate Search ■ Maintain my Profile ■ Reports ■ FAQs ■ Sign Out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ My Home ■ Search for Vacancies ■ My Profile ■ Change Password ■ Logout

Table 3: Main functions available to users

- 3.24 It is worth noting that employers themselves do not have their own registration or account on the system. They can search for vacancies in the same way that a learner would, but do not have their own log-in or account.
- 3.25 The following section sets out the findings on how the various user groups are using the system and how easy they find it to do so.

Learners

What learners use the Apprenticeship vacancies system for

- 3.26 From the Learner online survey, the majority of learners who register on the site do so because they are actively thinking about taking up an Apprenticeship (79 per cent of all respondents), rather than simply to get more information on Apprenticeships generally (16 percent of respondents). Most of

the respondents to the survey use the site regularly, with 59 per cent having used the site more than 5 times and only 6.5 per cent having used it only once.⁶

3.27 The most popular functions used on the site, according to the Learner survey, are searching for a vacancy using a Basic or Detailed Search, followed by completing an application form. The least used functions were searching for a Learning Provider and using the Help Section.

3.28 Learners surveyed found the site most useful for managing vacancy applications, giving it a mean rating of 8.42 when asked to give a rating of between 1 (not at all useful) and 10 (very useful). Learners also found the site useful for completing application forms (mean rating of 8.31) and searching for vacancies using various methods. See Figure 5.

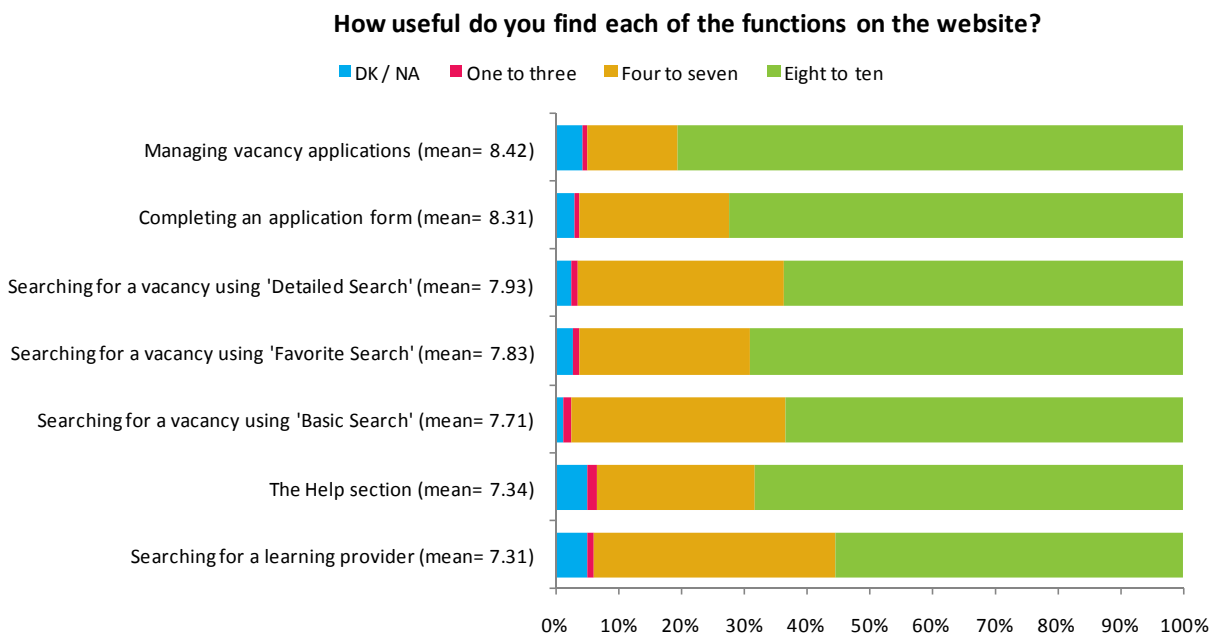


Figure 5: Source, Learners Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

How easy learners found using the site

3.29 Qualitative interviews with learners largely showed that learners found the site easy to use and didn't require any additional help with most tasks. A number of learners interviewed said that the site was "very easy to use", "straightforward" and that they "didn't need any help to use it". A few learners required some support from, for example, school, college or learning providers for specific information or to complete some tasks.

3.30 This is supported by findings from the Learner online survey; those who had applied for an Apprenticeship vacancy using the Apprenticeship vacancies system (331 respondents) gave it an average (mean) rating of 8.03 out of 10, on

⁶ The WebTrends report indicates that overall learners on average visit the site only once; this suggests that the sample of respondents to the survey includes more regular users than the average total population.

a scale between 1 (not at all easy) and 10 (very easy), suggesting that learners found it relatively straightforward to apply for vacancies using the system.

- 3.31 Learner respondents in the survey were asked, since using the Apprenticeship vacancies system, whether they required any further help to complete the process of applying for an Apprenticeship. 90 per cent stated 'No'. This also shows how straightforward the process is.
- 3.32 On the whole, the majority (85 per cent) of respondents to the Learner online survey did not have problems using the Apprenticeship vacancies system website. The 15 per cent that had had a problem were asked to state what problems they had experienced. The most common problem was not being able to logon to the Apprenticeship vacancies system website. This was followed by issues related to searching for and applying for a vacancy.
- 3.33 This finding, and feedback from the qualitative interviews, supports the findings from the S Cool report that one of the main issues encountered by learners is selecting a user name and password which meet the security standards set, and then remembering these details.
- 3.34 Only four per cent of those who experienced a problem then contacted anyone for support, the majority of whom contacted the Apprenticeship vacancies system Helpdesk. Those that did use the Helpdesk generally found the service provided satisfactory, giving mean ratings of between six and eight (i.e. indicating positive levels of satisfaction) for the service received for various aspects of the service, on a scale of between 1 (very dissatisfied) and 10 (very satisfied). See Figure 6.

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of the service you receive from the help desk?

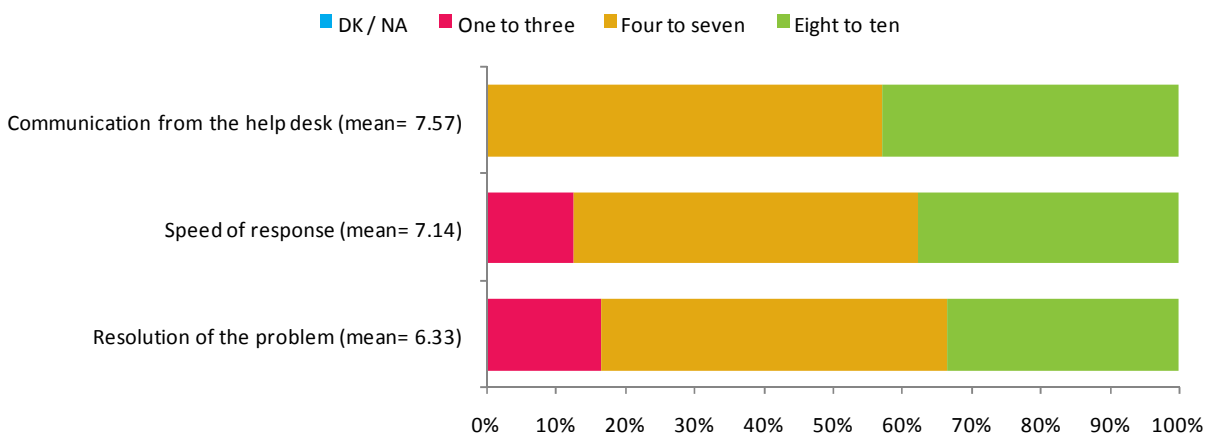


Figure 6: Source, Learners Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

Providers

Extent of use of Apprenticeship vacancies system

- 3.35 Consultation with providers via telephone interviews and discussion groups indicates that these providers have received training on the system and are using it regularly. However, wider discussion suggests that not all providers are actively using the system.
- 3.36 Providers consulted were on the whole very supportive of the concept of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Most felt that it fitted with their existing role with employers, in which they already provide facilities for advertising vacancies, managing applications and initial filtering of learners on behalf of employers, as well as bringing additional benefits such as free advertising, and more credibility for Apprenticeships as a whole.
- 3.37 However, there are still several usability issues which make using the system less easy and more time consuming. The issues raised are similar to those reported in the S Cool report, which has already put forward a series of recommendations to address these technicalities; therefore, these individual issues will not be repeated here.

Fit with providers' systems

- 3.38 Providers had mixed views as to how well the Apprenticeship vacancies system integrated with their own processes and systems. As a new tool, providers are still at this stage establishing how to fit the Apprenticeship vacancies system with their existing processes, and are determining what level of integration is appropriate given the capabilities of the system. Most providers generally felt that the system integrates well at a high level as an additional tool for advertising Apprenticeships and attracting applicants and some felt that it enhanced functionality over previous systems, for example by ensuring all applications are in one central location.
- 3.39 Some providers have experienced difficulties when trying to integrate the system more fully into their wider processes. For example, some providers use the system to update their own tracking systems (either electronic or paper-based), but encountered problems transferring information between the systems. This is due to the fact that the data on the Apprenticeship vacancies system cannot be exported electronically and therefore has to be printed off and re-entered into the provider's own system. Some providers found the format of the printed outputs from the system difficult to read. Another example given was that the system does not have the facilities for wider communications with learners, for example to send individual messages to learners regarding further interviews, progress in processing their application, and detailed feedback following the decision on their application.
- 3.40 Some providers therefore felt that that the Apprenticeship vacancies system creates an additional layer of admin on top of their existing systems. A number of providers commented that they continue to use their own systems

and recruitment activity, and therefore the system is more time-consuming to update on top of existing tasks.

- 3.41 Overall, providers appear to be using the Apprenticeship vacancies system as part of their wider Apprenticeship recruitment and management processes. Providers are establishing what capabilities the system can and can't provide, and are becoming more familiar with the system and using it within their own processes. They are also building relationships with regional NAS leads and feel comfortable with contacting them for help with using the site.

Other stakeholders

- 3.42 As of the end of March 2009 an additional profile for 'partners' was rolled out on the Apprenticeship vacancies system, where stakeholders such as Connexions, nextstep and Jobcentre Plus staff can log in and use certain facilities. Some of these stakeholders had logged onto the system prior to the addition of the Partners account, by setting up accounts as 'learners' in order to access the site, and some continue to use these as dummy log-ins to search for vacancies.
- 3.43 Most Connexions staff interviewed reported that they are using the Apprenticeship vacancies system site fairly regularly, but in addition to their own systems and advertising sites. Most staff state that they use the Apprenticeship vacancies system to get the latest information on vacancies in their area, and use this to update their own systems. The majority report that they find the Apprenticeship vacancies system simple and easy to use.
- 3.44 Those working as Personal Advisors to young people also use the site in one-to-one sessions, demonstrating how to use it and looking for suitable vacancies. nextstep advisors interviewed also said that they used the site in one-to-one sessions with young adults, helping them to find and apply for vacancies.
- 3.45 As mentioned previously, Jobcentre Plus has had little involvement with the Apprenticeship vacancies system to date. Advisors are not currently systematically using or promoting the site to clients. Similarly, very few schools and teachers have thus far been made aware of the system.

Employers

How employers use the Apprenticeship vacancies system

- 3.46 As noted above, most employers do not have a specific account to log-in to the Apprenticeship vacancies system. This means that the many employers do not use the system itself, as this is managed on their behalf by learning providers. Therefore in the case of employers, the evaluation focuses on the overall service that the Apprenticeship vacancies system provides as a whole, rather than the system itself.

3.47 The exception is large employers, where they are both the employer and effectively the learning provider (i.e. provide their own training facilities), some of whom have their own account and manage vacancies on the system.

How easy employers find the Apprenticeship vacancies system

3.48 Feedback from employers via the online survey indicates that they are fairly happy with the service the Apprenticeship vacancies system provides, giving it a mean rating of 6.65 from a scale between 1 (very poor) and 10 (very good). See Figure 7.

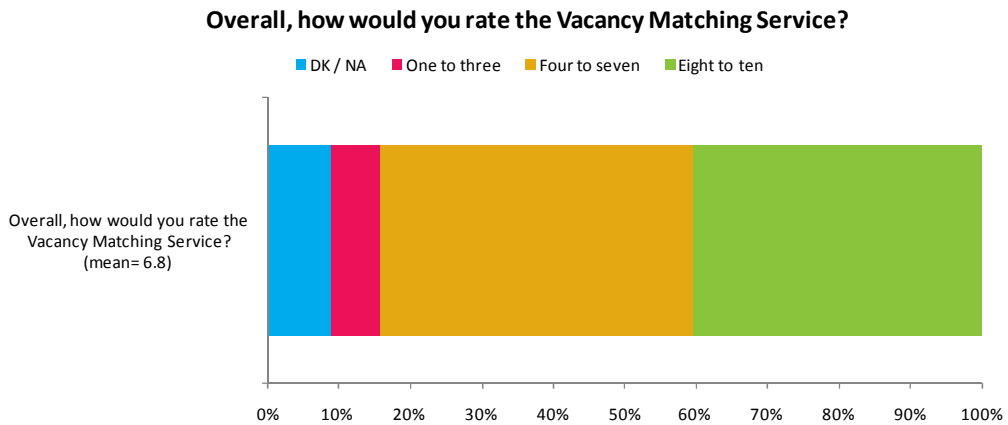


Figure 7: Source, Employers Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

3.49 The easiness, or otherwise, of certain aspects of the Apprenticeship vacancies system were rated by Employer respondents. In all, they were asked to rate five aspects and give a rating between 1 (not at all easy) and 10 (very easy). ‘Selecting a Learning provider’ rated highest at 8.25, whilst ‘Advertising a vacancy’ was rated lowest, with a mean of 6.72. See Figure 8.

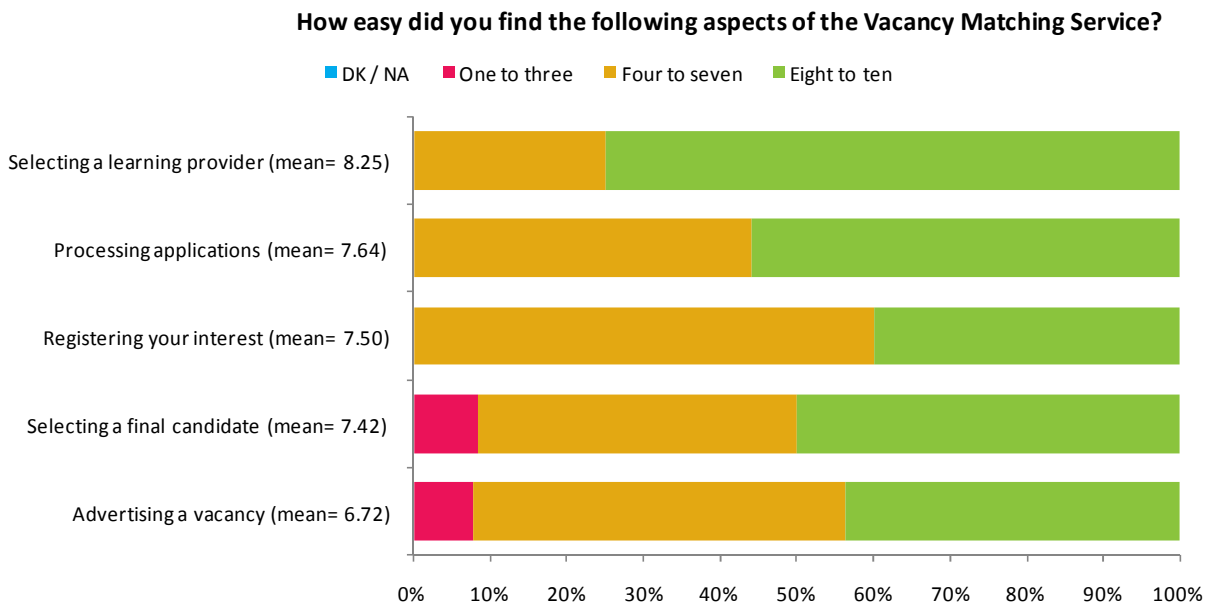


Figure 8: Source, Employers Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

3.50 Respondents to the Employer online survey were also asked how well the Apprenticeship vacancies system worked with their existing recruitment and training procedures and systems. Respondents rated this on a scale of 1 (not at all well) and 10 (very well) and gave a mean rating of 6.16.

Section 3 Summary

The Apprenticeship vacancies system has attracted a large increase in the number of learners using the site, who generally find it helpful and easy to use for searching and applying for vacancies. However there is a large imbalance in the supply of Apprenticeship places on offer to meet high and increasing demand from learners.

Providers are supportive of the concept of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and have received widespread training to use the system. There has been mixed success in integrating it with providers' existing systems, and initial usability issues have made the experience less positive for providers. Nevertheless, employers are generally happy with the service that they receive from the Apprenticeship vacancies system as managed by their provider.

Use amongst other stakeholders is mixed. Connexions staff have had the most exposure to the Apprenticeship vacancies system and find it a useful tool. However the system is yet to be rolled out systematically to other partners including nextstep, Jobcentre Plus and schools.

4 Benefits and value of Apprenticeship vacancies system

4.1 This section draws out the main benefits and value the Apprenticeship vacancies system brings to those who have engaged with the system thus far. The findings are divided between learners, employers, providers and other stakeholders, reflecting the differences in views of each group on their requirements from the Apprenticeship vacancies system, and therefore the benefits and value that they see. The benefits reported in the research are compared against NAS's expected benefits of the system for various stakeholders, as set out in Table 1 in the Introduction.

4.2 The key value of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, finding consensus across all stakeholders, was the concept that the system acts as a 'one stop shop' for Apprenticeship recruitment. In combination with the Apprenticeships website, the site provides the information to find out about both Apprenticeships in general and specific Apprenticeship vacancies, and provides the facilities to apply and process these applications. Stakeholders frequently mentioned that a significant benefit of the Apprenticeship vacancies system is having all this information and facilities in one place, and specifically focused on Apprenticeships.

Learners

4.3 In terms of both the survey and qualitative discussions many learners viewed the Apprenticeship vacancies system in a very positive light. Positive to note is that when respondents were asked 'Overall, how would you rate the Apprenticeship online Vacancy Matching System?' by giving a rating between 1 (very poor) and 10 (very high), this rated a mean of 7.82. Furthermore, the most frequent response given was the maximum rating of 10 (26 percent of respondents giving this rating), and ratings given by respondents between 8 and 10 made up 67 per cent of marks awarded. See Figure 9.

Overall, how would you rate the Apprenticeship online Vacancy Matching System?

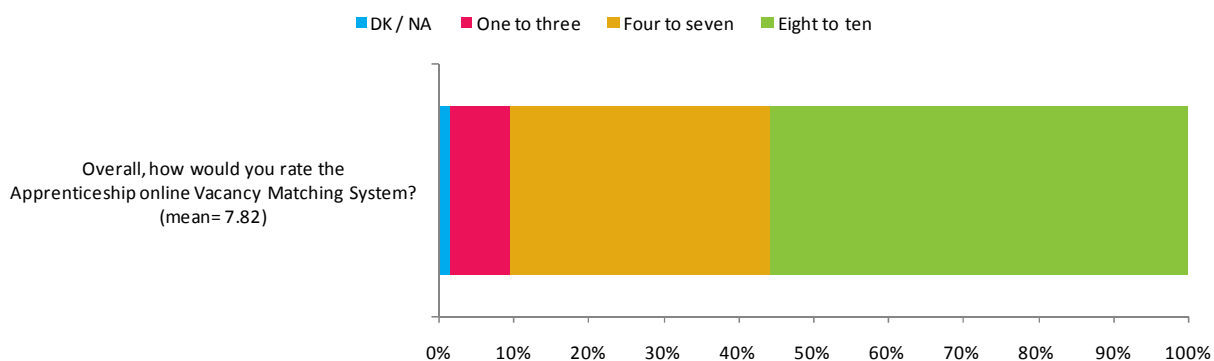


Figure 9: Source, Learner Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

4.4 The Apprenticeship vacancies system in general meets the expected benefits it was intended to provide for learners. The survey asked learners to state whether they agreed with the expected benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system as set out by NAS (listed in the Introduction), and indicated that they agreed fairly strongly with the majority of these statements. Learners on average rated most highly the ability the Apprenticeship vacancies system gave to search and apply for local, regional or national Apprenticeships. See Figure 10.

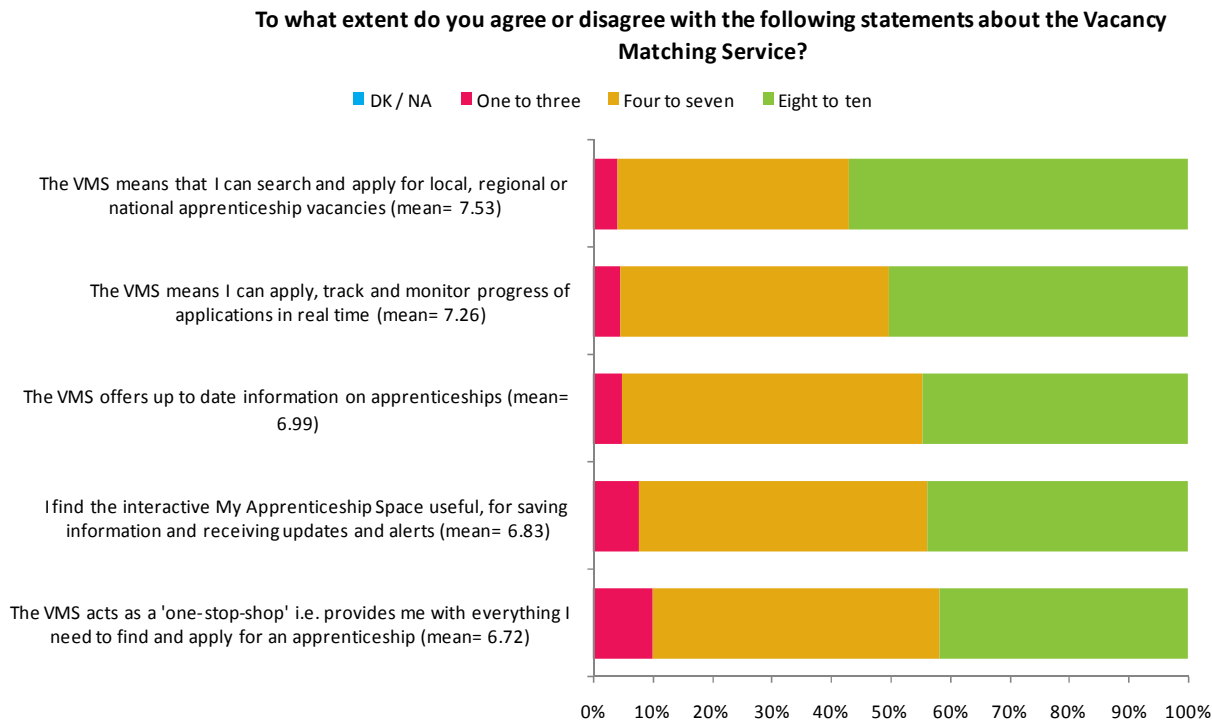


Figure 10: Source, Learners Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

Ease of use

4.5 For learners, the system is seen as easy to use due to a combination of factors: all the information and tools are in one place; it is easily accessible at any time as an online tool; and the content is easy to use.

4.6 As outlined in Section 3, learners found the system easy to use, and valued highly the functions available to search for vacancies, complete applications and manage those applications all on one site. Figure 11 overleaf shows that learners found that Apprenticeship vacancies system had improved their overall experience of Apprenticeships, and in particular it has improved finding out about Apprenticeships and Apprenticeship vacancies and applying for vacancies (rated between 1 (not at all improved) and 10 (very improved)).

How much do you agree that the Vacancy Matching System has improved the following areas?

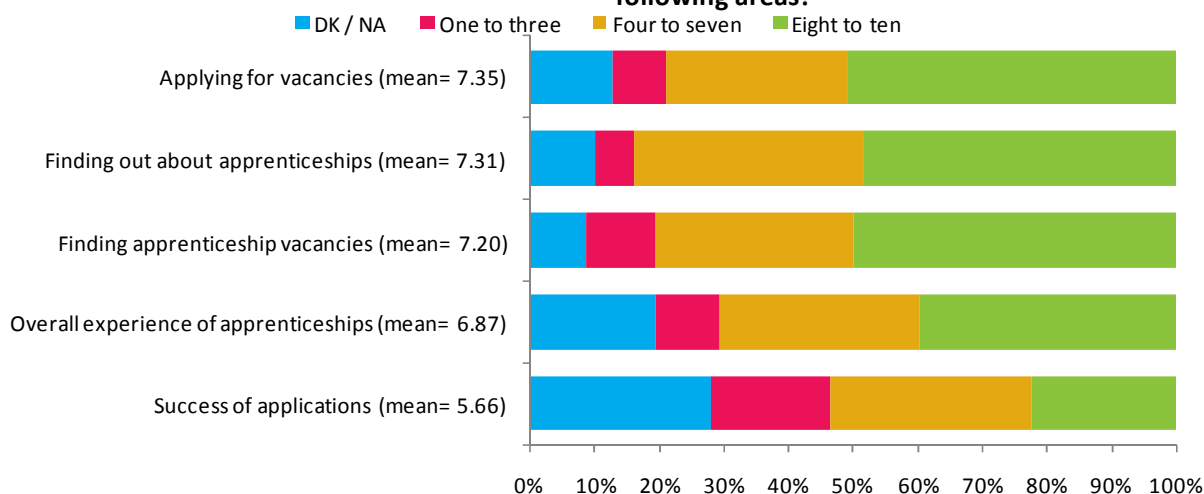


Figure 11: Source, Learners Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

4.7 In comparison to other general recruitment websites, some users consulted felt that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is suitable for a younger age set, as they perceived the system to be less intimidating and more user-friendly for younger users. For instance, one learner noted that the Apprenticeship vacancies system places less emphasis on previous work experience, as appropriate to those just starting out on their careers, than other general recruitment sites. Others noted that the system contains more information than other sites, and therefore doesn't require high levels of previous knowledge about Apprenticeships or employment in general. This benefit therefore supports the Government's target of having one in five young people in an Apprenticeship by 2020.

4.8 Learners and intermediaries who support them, such as Connexions, also stated that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is accessible as an online tool, and that it can be used at any time of day in the learner's own time. This allows learners to browse the site in their own time and take their time in completing applications.

4.9 To support the above finding, some Connexions and nextstep staff commented on how the system is a time-saver for learners, "cutting out the legwork" and the "cumbersome and clumsy" system of applying to individual providers, therefore making Apprenticeships more accessible to potential apprentices and facilitating the use of the system.

Increased access to information

4.10 A benefit highlighted within the learner qualitative and quantitative responses was the concept that the Apprenticeship vacancies system gives people a place to start looking for information and vacancies, when their knowledge would be limited on where to start their search. For instance, before using the Apprenticeship vacancies system website, most learners had not had any contact with employers or learning providers. See Figure 12 overleaf.

4.11 This opens up new avenues for finding out about Apprenticeships, and the learning providers and employers that offer them, and doesn't rely on learners having previously established contacts.

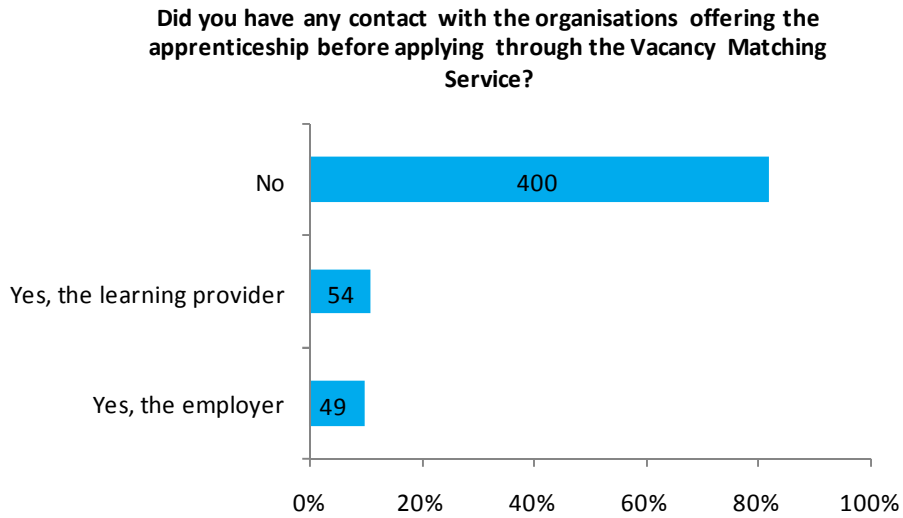


Figure 12: Source, Learners Online Survey (Multiple choice question)

4.12 The Apprenticeship vacancies system also gives further information about the specific information about each vacancy. As Figure 13 below indicates, learners in particular rated highly the information on pay and conditions and the training available, on a scale between 1 (very poor) and 10 (very good).

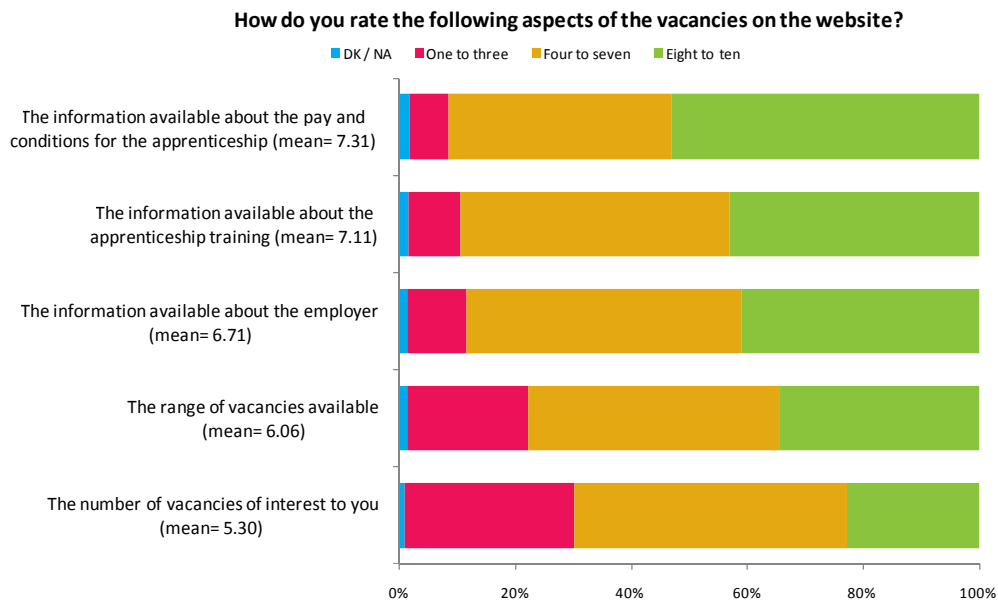


Figure 13: Source, Learners Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

4.13 This is supported by findings from the qualitative research; a number of interview respondents had limited knowledge of Apprenticeships until they

visited the website. For instance, one learner was not aware apprentices received payment or that they may require a day release at college.

Equality of opportunity

4.14 The availability of the system on a national level has further increased fairness and equality of opportunity for Apprenticeship learners. Prior to the Apprenticeship vacancies system, employers and providers may have taken certain routes to advertise which could have restricted the pool of potential apprentices they attracted. In advertising the posts on this system it facilitates increased opportunity for all potential apprentices. An example of this is where in the past, vacancies would have been advertised in a city centre Connexions office and not seen by young people from nearby villages.

Link to employment

4.15 Several intermediaries who work with learners noted that the Apprenticeship vacancies system ensures that vacancies placed on the site are guaranteed to be offered by an employer, as well as a learning provider. As the system only allows adverts to be placed for vacancies where an employer is already lined up (i.e. not Programme-led Apprenticeships), learners can be confident that the Apprenticeship will be employer-based, ensuring that they gain valuable on the job training from the start.

Employers

4.16 In relation to the expected benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system for employers (as set out in the Introduction), employers agree most strongly with the statement that the Apprenticeship vacancies system offers free advertising for their Apprenticeship vacancies. This received an average (mean) rating of 8.39 on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) and 10 (strongly agree). Employers agreed less strongly with the other expected benefits set out for the Apprenticeship vacancies system. See Figure 14.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Vacancy Matching Service?

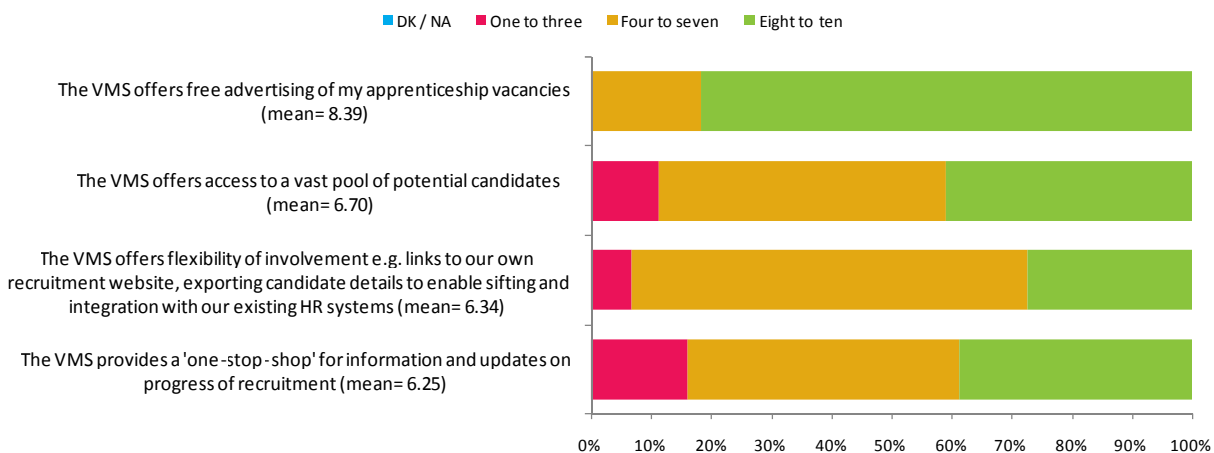


Figure 14: Source, Employers Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

- 4.17 Supporting this, the qualitative interviews found that employers and providers reported that a key benefit of the Apprenticeship vacancies system is its offer of an additional free advertising medium. This has the main value of acting as a traffic-driver to employers' own websites, as well as reducing costs on marketing and recruitment.
- 4.18 Employers were, furthermore, positive about the role of the Apprenticeship vacancies system in increasing the profile and visibility of Apprenticeships in general. As one employer argued, the system will make Apprenticeships "sought after alongside other mainstream options...lifting up their profile" (large employer, automotive engineering sector) and as a consequence may increase application rates.

Quality of applications

- 4.19 Employers recognised that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has the potential to allow learners to make more informed decisions about the Apprenticeships they apply for. By specifying grades required and the work entailed, it allows learners to have a realistic view of whether they are suitable for the job and thus can increase the quality of applications.

Equality of opportunity

- 4.20 Some employers see the Apprenticeship vacancies system as offering fairness of opportunity for different sized companies. For example, smaller firms can compete for apprentices on the same level as larger multinational firms without having to increase their recruitment costs. This can therefore create a level playing field and increase the competitiveness in the market.

Providers

- 4.21 In reference to the expected benefits set out in Table 1, feedback from providers suggests that there is agreement that the Apprenticeship vacancies system benefits them by providing an integrated system which is relatively easy to use. However usability issues mean that many providers do not currently believe that the system provides a 'professional and efficient' vacancy advertising and matching resource. Furthermore, issues reported in Section 3 highlight that there has been some difficulty with exporting candidate application details and integrating with existing HR systems, thereby reducing the 'flexibility of involvement'. It is difficult to assess the impact of the Apprenticeship vacancies system on achieving providers' targets at this stage; this is explored in more detail in Section 6. Providers did, however, note additional benefits and value that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has provided, as outlined below.

Recruitment tool to attract employers

- 4.22 Providers identified one key benefit of the Apprenticeship vacancies system as being that it increases the means by which employers can advertise; in this way it is "another string to offer employers". It expands the service providers offer

to employers, and thus can increase their potential to recruit the apprentices they need.

Support from NAS

- 4.23 One provider particularly valued the service offered by NAS because all vacancies are checked before they go live. A potential barrier for providers is the fear of being accused of discrimination in their advertisements. As one provider plainly put it; “you don’t want to land yourself in something, legally”. Therefore in having the safety net of NAS checking the system, providers can feel at ease in the advertisement they put forward for publication.

Screening facility

- 4.24 The Apprenticeship vacancies system provides the facilities to act as a filter for applications. By having the ability to advertise the post in a more detailed way, including uploading information more specific to the role and adding additional questions to the application form, the system allows providers to screen and filter applications.
- 4.25 An area of the system that directly influences the quality of applicants is the ‘reality check’ section that employer/providers can fill in regarding the vacancy. A number of providers commented on the usefulness of this section. In adding this information providers are able to tailor the post to a specific need, giving the learner a realistic expectation of what the Apprenticeship will entail (for example, the hours of work, the regularity of the hours etc). This enables the learner to make more informed decisions on the vacancies they apply for, and ‘self match’ themselves to the vacancy, which filters out those less suited to the role.

On-line access

- 4.26 Providers, as well as employers and learners, commented that an on-line tool is easy to access. This has the added value of being able to use the site whenever you wish, 24 hours a day, thus making it quicker and easier to find and apply for vacancies. This has facilitated the use of the system, and potentially the numbers registering for Apprenticeships.

Other stakeholders

- 4.27 A key benefit of the Apprenticeship vacancies system highlighted by SSCs, Connexions and nextstep is that having all the information in one place eliminates the time-consuming procedure of having to search through various sites and publications to capture all Apprenticeship advertisements and vacancies. This, therefore, makes the processes simpler and easier for all involved, thus has the potential to increase interest and applications.
- 4.28 In the longer term, stakeholders including Jobcentre Plus, Connexions and nextstep felt that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has the potential to positively increase awareness of Apprenticeships. The promotion of

Apprenticeships as a national brand brings the added value of raising visibility, and thus hopefully the uptake, of Apprenticeships. As commented by a Jobcentre Plus employee “Job seekers will see the Vacancy Matching Service as a solid and well respected brand”, therefore increasing trust in the site.

Connexions

- 4.29 Connexions interviewees tended to be in agreement on most issues, with the majority commenting the main benefit was that all the vacancies were in one place. Added to this is the view that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is a highly valuable information site, allowing Connexions to incorporate the system in their broader offer of services to 14-19 year olds. The Apprenticeship vacancies system therefore complements their own role, and provides additional benefits enabling them to increase the quality of service on offer.

Jobcentre Plus

- 4.30 Jobcentre Plus (JCP) saw the system as an invaluable source of information. In the current economic climate, JCP has experienced an increase in the diversity of its clients, and as a result expect to encounter more enquiries about Apprenticeships. The Apprenticeship vacancies system offers a “definite quarry of Apprenticeship vacancies”, thus potentially providing JCP with the capability to offer their clients a range of information and vacancies. This will allow JCP to provide their clients with a high level service, reflecting well on their reputation.
- 4.31 JCP viewed the promotion of the Apprenticeship vacancies system as a national brand as a massive advantage, therefore adding value to their own in-house service’s “solid and well respected brand, adding credibility to skills solution packages at JCP”.

Section 4 Summary

The key benefit highlighted by the majority of stakeholders is that the Apprenticeship vacancies system does act as a ‘one-stop-shop’ for Apprenticeship information and recruitment. For learners, and the stakeholders that work with them, this means that they can search and apply for any local or national Apprenticeship via one easy to use and accessible site. Having all this information in one place saves time in searching for Apprenticeships, and the online format means that it is easily accessible.

The Apprenticeship vacancies system offers an additional tool for recruitment for providers and their employers, and provides free advertising and awareness-raising for both. The information on the site provides a two-way screening facility, whereby learners can use the information on vacancies to select those most appropriate and providers/employers can use the application system as a way of screening applicants. This is welcomed as a way of increasing the quality of final candidates.

5 Good practice

5.1 At this early stage, many users are still establishing how they use the site and getting to grips with the functionality of the system. Examples of good practice are therefore somewhat limited around innovative use of the site, but some examples are given below of broader good practice around promoting and integrating the Apprenticeship vacancies system with current Apprenticeship activity. The examples explored below are some which would be worth sharing with others across the NAS stakeholder network.

Marketing and awareness-raising

5.2 Although no marketing materials specifically for the Apprenticeship vacancies system have been produced nationally, some regions have developed their own materials to give to various stakeholders including learners, employers and providers. For instance, the North East region has developed fact-sheets for learners and employers on Apprenticeships in general, including introductory information on the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

Working in partnership with NAS

5.3 At a national level, NAS and Connexions have agreed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to set up principles for working together regarding Apprenticeships. This is a standard document, which regions are expected to tailor to fit the structures that operate in each region. NAS have also developed a standard protocol for data sharing between NAS and Connexions, which regional NAS teams are expected to implement with partners in their region. In some regions, we have reports of Connexions teams who are making good progress in this area. For example, in the South East Connexions are working extensively with NAS to establish the details for the data sharing protocol.

5.4 Some other (sub)regions have reported that they intend to hold Apprenticeship vacancies system meetings with representatives from regional NAS teams, 14-19 Local Authorities and Connexions. The purpose of these meetings is to discuss Apprenticeship engagement and wider partnership ways of working as well as specific Apprenticeship vacancies system issues.

Partners' proactive roll-out and integration

5.5 At a sub-regional level, we can see evidence of some partners such as Connexions South West taking a pro-active approach to Apprenticeship vacancies system. In this respect, those at strategic or managerial level have worked well to communicate the launch of the Apprenticeship vacancies system to their teams and cascade key information about use of the system. Efforts have been made to ensure that operational staff have received training and the leads have made plans to run a second cohort of training. Further to this, those at a senior level are currently working to see how to best integrate the system with their own Connexions recruitment system.

Apprenticeship vacancies system discussion groups and review of site

5.6 Outside of the CFE evaluation we have found that in some regions they have adopted a pro-active approach to reviewing the site in its early stages. The London Work Based Learning Alliance has hosted a workshop with learning providers to share their views on the Apprenticeship vacancies system as well as running an e-survey. From this the Alliance has set out a series of recommendations around bureaucracy busting, contracting, system guidance and usability.

Provider recruitment activity

5.7 Some providers interviewed already take a very hands-on approach to engaging with employers and recruiting apprentices, including carrying out their own screening and preparation of candidates for interview. Often this includes interviewing all applicants for a particular position which can be time consuming but ensures good quality candidates and equality of opportunity.

5.8 To further facilitate this role, some providers have made good use of the additional screening questions which they can tailor and add to the application form on the Apprenticeship vacancies system. These questions, known as the 'personal questions' have been successfully used to find a shortlist of suitable candidates from the high numbers that apply. This has proved helpful for providers who are experiencing increased number of applications per vacancy as a result of advertising them on the system, which has increased the workload of providers who continue to interview all candidates.

Employers integrating Apprenticeship vacancies system

5.9 One large multi-region employer interviewed is at present exploring how the Apprenticeship vacancies system will fit with their own HR approach, and is using the Apprenticeship vacancies system as part of a coordinated wider campaign to engage with potential learners across each of the regions they work in. They are currently using the system in addition to local press, schools and Connexions to create a "regional footprint", and see the Apprenticeship vacancies system as having value in its own right in addition to alternative recruitment methods.

Section 5 Summary

Good practice is generally focussed around pro-active promotion of the Apprenticeship vacancies system by the regional NAS teams, providers and other partners. Best use of the system is made when it is integrated into existing systems and practices and used as the key tool in finding and filling Apprenticeship places.

Examples of positive partnership working demonstrate how the Apprenticeship vacancies system can be used as a part of broader partnership activity around Apprenticeships, ensuring that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is promoted and used to the mutual benefit of all partners involved.

6 Influence of Apprenticeship vacancies system on Apprenticeship engagement

- 6.1 Given that the NAS is in the process of developing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Apprenticeship vacancies system it has not been possible to measure the level of influence against specific criteria, nor in a quantitative manner at this stage. Broadly, and informally speaking, NAS has signalled that the objectives of Apprenticeship vacancies system are to:
- increase the levels of Apprenticeship employer engagement
 - increase the number of Apprenticeship vacancies
 - increase the number of successful Apprenticeship applications.
- 6.2 The KPIs will include an overall national level, of which each region will have a share of the KPIs to achieve. The KPIs will be set for each academic year, i.e. 1 August to 31 July.
- 6.3 The longitudinal nature of this evaluation allows the researchers to compare the initial influence of the Apprenticeship vacancies system on engagement over the first few months of the system with the level of influence after approximately a year of operation. In this, the initial report, our findings set the baseline for the final report which will measure the level of influence after the first year of operation.
- 6.4 At this stage, with the available data, it is difficult to establish the impact of the Apprenticeship vacancies system on the above objectives, and in this report we can only comment on indicative findings and their implications for Apprenticeship engagement in the future.

Learner engagement and awareness

- 6.5 From the survey, we can note that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has had a positive overall influence on potential apprentices. When asked to select one statement from five options, of the 489 respondents, 69 per cent stated that it had made them much more likely or a little more likely to apply for an Apprenticeship. What is more, nearly half (48 per cent) of all respondents gave the most positive answer, 'It has made me much more likely to apply'.
- 6.6 Providers suggested that the Apprenticeship vacancies system had increased the number of applicants for Apprenticeship vacancies, markedly in some cases. It was suggested that the system made vacancies available to a wider field of potential learners. As mentioned in Section 3 one provider reported receiving 237 applications for 13 vacancies. A similar outcome had been experienced by most of the other providers we consulted with as part of this phase of the evaluation.

6.7 Useful information was gained from the Learner survey to suggest which factors are most important in attracting learners and encouraging them to apply for Apprenticeships. The survey showed that information on 'future prospects' was the most important factor with a mean rating of 8.65 on a scale between 1 (not at all important) and 10 (very important).

6.8 Other important factors include the location of the vacancy and the training to be provided. The fact that these factors were given on average very similar ratings in terms of importance suggests that learners are looking for Apprenticeships that are both in the sector they are interested in and at a suitable location. See Figure 15.

Which of the following factors most influence your decision when deciding which Apprenticeship vacancy to apply for?

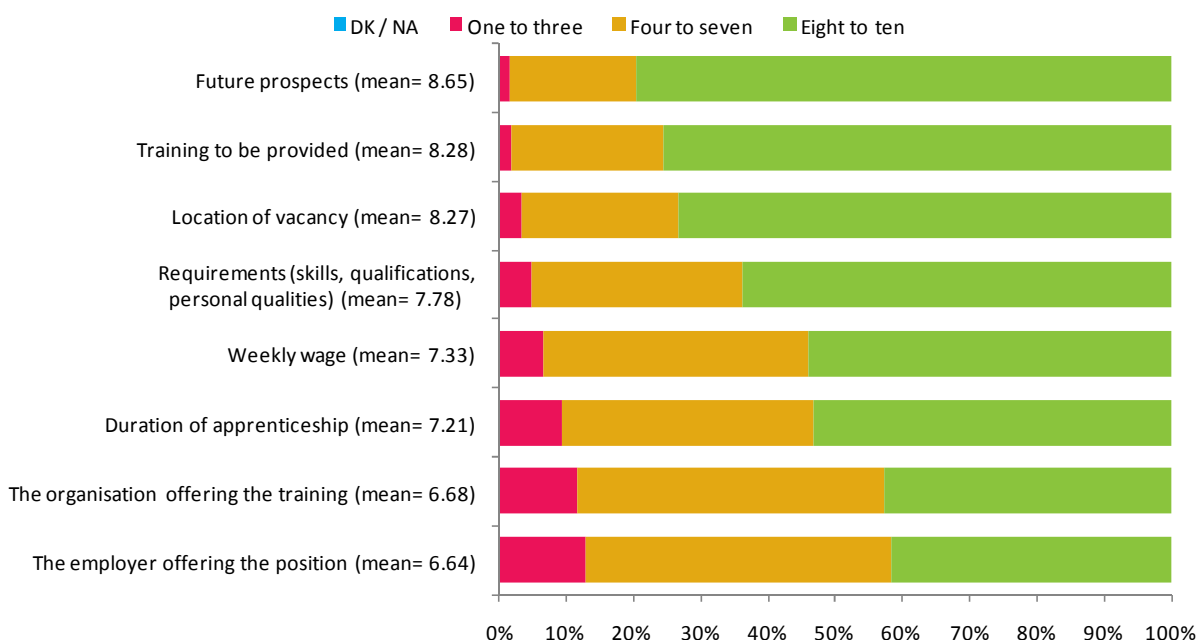


Figure 15: Source, Learners Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

6.9 Respondents to the Learner online survey were asked whether they would recommend the Apprenticeship vacancies system to a friend or family member. Each of the 489 respondents rated their recommendation between 1 (very unlikely) and 10 (very likely). The average (mean) rating was 7.56. This indicates that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is a valued product by the majority of the users surveyed for this interim evaluation report, and that its impact may increase as awareness is raised by word of mouth.

Employer engagement and awareness

6.10 Providers reported that they generally hadn't explicitly promoted the Apprenticeship vacancies system to employers, limiting its impact on employers' decision to engage with the system. This is because providers feel that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is part of the existing service that they offer to employers, including recruiting and selecting candidates.

Therefore providers have only mentioned the Apprenticeship vacancies system to gain employers' initial consent to advertise their vacancies on the system, but haven't particularly highlighted the Apprenticeship vacancies system itself. Where providers had spoken to employers about the system it was to show them how existing vacancies were progressing or to generally make them feel part of the process. It had not been used to actively engage more employers.

6.11 This was reflected in the responses received when sending out the Employer online survey; many providers who had been asked to forward the survey to employers responded that their employers would be unaware that the Apprenticeship vacancies system was being used on their behalf and therefore would not be able to complete the survey.

6.12 For those employers that were aware of the system, the impact of the introduction of the Apprenticeship vacancies system was assessed by asking Employer respondents how it had affected five aspects of Apprenticeships recruitment. Respondents were asked to rate each aspect on a scale of 1 (it is much worse) to 10 (it is much better). From the employer's perspective the Apprenticeship vacancies system was seen as an improved medium through which to advertise vacancies. Although, it wasn't seen as being particularly effective in reducing the resources spent on filling a vacancy. See Figure 16.

How much do you agree that the Vacancy Matching Service has improved the following aspects of Apprenticeship recruitment?

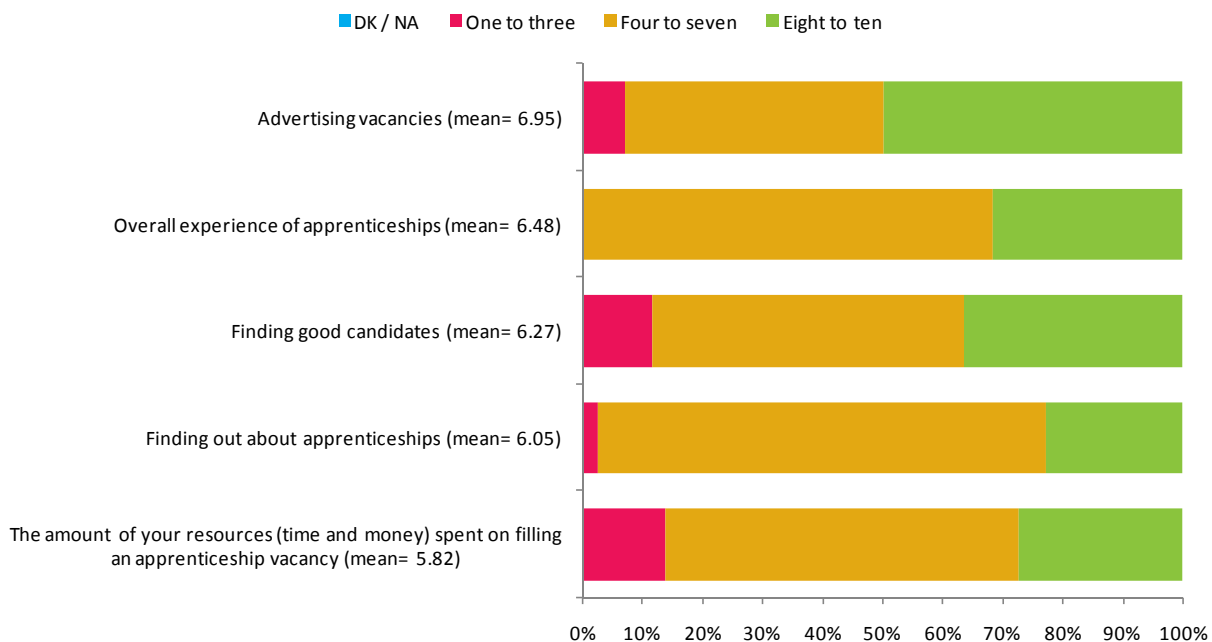


Figure 16: Source, Employers Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)

6.13 Our survey focussed on employers that had used the Apprenticeship vacancies system so it should not be surprising that the system is the most commonly used route for advertising. As Section 3 highlighted, at present there is still a high reliance on other advertising routes such as the employers own website

and local media. The final report will build on this baseline to assess whether behaviour has shifted as the system develops.

6.14 The impact of the Apprenticeship vacancies system upon employers' approaches to Apprenticeships was also assessed via another question which asked whether its introduction had influenced respondents' decisions to offer Apprenticeships. It is positive to note that nearly a third (13/44) of respondents to this question indicated that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has made them more likely to offer Apprenticeships, even at such early stages of the roll out of the system. The majority (30/44) of users did, however, feel that it had not affected their decision to offer Apprenticeships. See Figure 17.

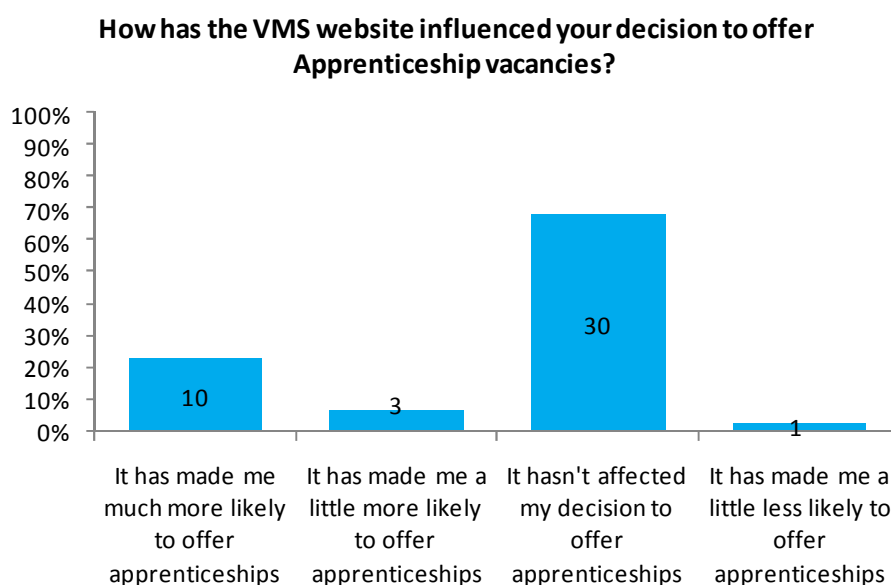


Figure 17: Source, Employers Online Survey (Base 44)

Volume of Apprenticeships (vacancies, applications)

6.15 The introduction of the Apprenticeship vacancies system has impacted positively on the number of learners applying for Apprenticeship positions according to providers consulted as part of this evaluation. The same providers felt the impact on the number of vacancies created has been negligible, despite national television advertising.

6.16 It is difficult to establish at this stage the additional effect that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has had on the number of Apprenticeship vacancies available, in comparison to what would have been made available through other routes in any case. For example, respondents to the Employer survey noted that they already offered Apprenticeship places and stated that "the vacancies exist whether Apprenticeship vacancies system is there or not".

6.17 It is also difficult to apply a quantitative outcome of the impact of the Apprenticeship vacancies system at this stage due to the lack of robust time series data available on the number of applications per vacancy. However, the Apprenticeship vacancies system Management Information and website

statistics recorded over the first four months since the introduction of the system provide a good benchmark for future analysis. In the final report of this longitudinal evaluation we will look at how the continued use of the Apprenticeship vacancies system has impacted upon:

- The number of learners registered
- The number of applications (allowing for seasonality)
- The number of vacancies advertised
- The number of vacancies filled
- The number of employers offering vacancies

Section 6 Summary

The Apprenticeship vacancies system appears at this early stage to have positively influenced learner engagement with Apprenticeships, with 69 per cent of learners surveyed saying that the system has made them more likely or much more likely to apply for an Apprenticeship. This is borne out by evidence of an increase in the applications per vacancy indicated by some providers.

The Apprenticeship vacancies system has had much less of an impact on employer engagement, as it has not been directly used as a tool to promote Apprenticeships and engage employers. However, of those surveyed who are aware of the site, nearly a third said that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has made them more likely to offer an Apprenticeship, indicating a potential positive affect of the system on the number of Apprenticeships on offer.

At this stage it is difficult to establish the quantitative and additional effect that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has had on overall Apprenticeship engagement levels, but this will be explored more fully in the final report.

7 Areas for improvement and recommendations

7.1 This section outlines the areas where stakeholders and end-users agree there are difficulties or issues and where the site would benefit from improvement, followed by our recommendations on potential ways of remedying these. Given that our evaluation excludes a detailed review of functionality, the intention here is to put forward difficulties on a more holistic level relating to the overall operation and use by different stakeholders, and to suggest improvements which do not require significant functional updates to the site.

Engaging end users

Employer engagement

7.2 As Section 3 highlights, currently the low level of vacancies on the Apprenticeship vacancies system is a major off-putting factor for learners who are discouraged when searches return very few relevant vacancies. Therefore the key area for improvement is to increase the number of vacancies being uploaded onto the system. This has two elements; firstly encouraging employers to increase the number of Apprenticeships they offer, which is a major ongoing task for the wider NAS team and should include the promotion of Apprenticeship vacancies system as a key tool. Secondly, it is key to ensure that all vacancies that are currently available are posted on the system by employers or providers.

7.3 Some suggested recommendations to increase employer engagement with the Apprenticeship vacancies system generally, based on feedback from our primary research, include:

- **Establishing a commitment to ensure that all NES employers use the Apprenticeship vacancies system to advertise all Apprenticeship vacancies.**
- **Providing updates to providers and stakeholders on Apprenticeship vacancies system take up and usage and share Key Performance Indicators.** To provide context that will enable Providers to develop their employer engagement strategies to help increase employers demand for Apprenticeships.

7.4 Further suggestions for encouraging more Apprenticeship places to be uploaded on the Apprenticeship vacancies system are outlined in the sections below.

Marketing and awareness-raising

7.5 There was a clear consensus from all stakeholders interviewed that there needs to be more marketing of Apprenticeship vacancies system to the target end-users as well as the wider group of stakeholders who could help support its roll out over the longer-term. It was agreed that one approach to increasing engagement and awareness of Apprenticeships for young people would be to target schools, teachers and career advisory staff.

7.6 However, in terms of increasing the overall success of Apprenticeships and number of successful matches, the resounding response was that employers should be targeted first and foremost. It seems that those employers that we spoke to in our interviews had not been made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system directly and most thought it essential for a direct approach to be made. In terms of medium, it was recommended that a brief leaflet should be produced in order to outline the functions and benefits of the system to businesses. Our recommendation is to:

- **Produce targeted marketing to promote Apprenticeships and specifically the Apprenticeship vacancies system aimed firstly at employers, but also at schools, teachers and careers advisory staff.**

Working alongside providers

7.7 Where providers were less receptive to the Apprenticeship vacancies system, this can mainly be attributed to their lack of awareness of the consultation which took place with providers in the early stages of the system's design. This resulted in a perception in amongst some providers that they only had a low level of involvement in the system's development. For example, where learning providers had not been directly involved in early talks (which included consultation with a core group of providers, representatives from the Association of Learning Providers (ALP) and ongoing dissemination to provider networks), there was less high level buy-in within the organisation and general attitudes and perceptions were much more negative, with some providers suggesting that; "it was presented as a fait accompli".

7.8 However, comparatively in the case where Connexions staff had been involved in the initial consultations with NAS, prior to the launch of Apprenticeship vacancies system, they seemed to be predominantly more positive towards the system. Some providers agreed that they would benefit from discussions and that they would welcome the opportunity to provide feedback to NAS in the future. Clear communication is necessary to ensure that providers' expectations are managed regarding the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Our recommendation is to:

- **Ensure clear communication between NAS and providers, identifying ways in which providers can provide feedback and input into the ongoing development of the system.**

7.9 One major issue for some of the providers that we spoke to was the posting of employers' full contact details on the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Their

main concern was the exposure of their own employer contact list to other providers who may then try to engage with employers for their own benefit. It has also meant that a number of learners have contacted the employer directly, instead of going through the Apprenticeship vacancies system and providers, thereby causing frustration to employers who expect providers to manage such enquiries on their behalf. It was pointed out that the majority of other public recruitment organisations such as Jobcentre Plus or DirectGov Jobs do not provide full employer details. A key issue for providers could be resolved if the Apprenticeship vacancies system was to adopt a similar policy. Our recommendation is to:

- **Review the need for full employer details to be publicised when Apprenticeship vacancies are advertised on the Apprenticeship vacancies system.**

7.10 Although providers were generally happy with the training they had received, there were a few suggestions as to whether further training or guidance would be useful. This included a checklist or guidance to see if the system is being used as expected based on the User Guide and initial information communicated from NAS; bulletin of updates to the site and good practice usage; and further training on accessing and using the Report function.

7.11 Several providers reported that the User Guide produced by NAS for Vacancy Managers (i.e. learning providers) is too lengthy and not user friendly.

- **Develop materials to share with providers to give practical advice and examples of how to best use and integrate the Apprenticeship vacancies system and highlight wider good practice.**

7.12 Whilst providers felt it would be useful to have some sort of check (e.g. additional training or good practice guide) to ensure that providers are using Apprenticeship vacancies system in the ways intended by NAS, some providers were more wary of introducing more detailed formal agreements on using the system. Some providers were concerned about the development of, for example, a Service Level Agreement on using the Apprenticeship vacancies system. The view, expressed by some, was that a SLA would be an unnecessary and restrictive document which would not increase provider buy in but detract from it.

7.13 It is essential to gain full buy in from providers and ensure that they are using the system fully; this is vital to the ongoing success of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, given their key role in liaising with employers and managing the vacancies on their behalf. A possible solution to ensure that all vacancies are being placed on this system is to make this a part of providers' contractual obligations. We recommend that NAS:

- **Review its ways of working with Providers, for example the possibility of making use of the Apprenticeship vacancies system a contractual obligation.**

Working with stakeholders

Jobcentre Plus

- 7.14 From the interviews with Jobcentre Plus we learnt there were varying degrees of awareness of the site and different levels of buy in. At a high level there were concerns that both Apprenticeship vacancies system and Apprenticeships had not been explicitly included in the overarching Departments for Welfare and Pensions and Business, Innovation and Skills' strategy for developing a Single Employer Offer. Currently there is no reference to Apprenticeships in the Job Seekers Agreement.
- 7.15 There was uncertainty expressed by Jobcentre Plus over plans for working together with NAS and specifically for establishing their role in relation to Apprenticeship vacancies system. It was stipulated that some form of high level working agreement would be greatly beneficial. There were mixed views on how JCP should work with the system but recognition that the Apprenticeship vacancies system may not be best integrated with their own recruitment system as on a technical level this may not be viable.
- 7.16 Jobcentre Plus staff requested that they needed more information on Apprenticeship vacancies system cascaded down to all on an operational level and that this should be in the form of awareness raising sessions or hands on training.

Connexions

- 7.17 Following the Memorandum of Understanding developed by NAS for Connexions, most staff are involved in integrating the Apprenticeship vacancies system in some way on an operational level. Depending on the interviewee we spoke to there were different degrees of awareness of other specific activity such as rolling out a regional protocol or a data sharing agreement.
- 7.18 Connexions staff requested information on: integrating Apprenticeship vacancies system with their own systems, marketing materials on system for employers as well as general updates from NAS regional teams on Apprenticeships.
- 7.19 A potential method of building on best practice and integrating the Apprenticeship vacancies system with existing Connexions systems could be the provision of cross-regional workshops, in order to generate ideas and share good practice. This could also be an opportunity for sharing more information on the Apprenticeship vacancies system to key partners and promoting it further with them. Our recommendation is for NAS to:
- **Establish forums for Providers and stakeholders such as Connexions, to review good practice in partnership working and integrating Apprenticeship vacancies system with existing processes.**

Youth advisors

7.20 As noted earlier in the report, to date there has been little engagement with those advising young people on career choices, such as schools, nextstep advisors and other youth advisors. Some learners reported that as a result they did not receive adequate support during the application process. We recommend that NAS:

- **Increases its level of engagement with schools, nextstep advisors and youth advisors to both inform them of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and suggest how they can best work to support learners.** Agree way of working with schools, nextstep advisors and youth advisors.

Sector Skills Councils

7.21 Feedback from some SSC interviewees suggested that there was uncertainty over how SSCs should be working alongside NAS both at a national and regional level. Although a protocol as such was not suggested, there was interest in establishing clearer roles around signposting to Apprenticeship vacancies system to support provider and other intermediaries' activity.

7.22 Representatives from SSCs suggested that they would like to receive some background information on the fit of Apprenticeship vacancies system with other existing public sector recruitment sites and employment initiatives, such as those of Jobcentre Plus, as well as management and trend data on hit rates. We recommend that NAS:

- **Secures the commitment of SSCs and other employer representative bodies to promote the Apprenticeship vacancies system to their networks.** This could be achieved by providing a high level briefing for SSC partners and other employer representative bodies such as the CBI to promote Apprenticeships and highlight the overall strategy for the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

Data sharing

7.23 All stakeholders expressed an interest in sharing information collected on the Apprenticeship vacancies system. In some cases, such as Connexions, this requires more informal feedback from regional NAS (e.g. Learner Services) teams to update them on the progress of individual learners they have referred to the Apprenticeship vacancies system. However, more broadly, stakeholders would like to see information from the system such as: a summary of vacancies by sector and location; key usage information from the site e.g. number of hits; what learners are applying for; success rates of applications etc.

Improving the information on the site

Sector and job type information

- 7.24 Some learners consulted felt that the information on the site was not sufficient to make an informed job search, and required further guidance from school, college or other support services to select an appropriate vacancy. This particularly applies to learners who did not have a clear idea of exactly what type of job they were looking for, and therefore didn't know where to start with their search i.e. suitable keywords or sectors to select.
- 7.25 Closely linked to the above view, some of the SSC stakeholders we interviewed pointed out that there is a lack of information on the different sectors and the industries therein. The view was that there are limitations to job search by sector for sectors which contain a diverse range of organisational types and functions, such as the Public Sector. Given the breadth of organisations within the Public Sector and complexity of make-up it was felt that it would be difficult for users to understand what types of Apprenticeship or job roles are actually available and this may limit user interest and response to vacancies. For example, it would be unclear to many that Apprenticeships such as Business Administration and Customer Service would be found across many public service areas including NHS, Government Departments and Local Authorities. We understand that this issue will be addressed as of August 2009, when the sectors listed on the search function will be reconsidered and changed.

Information on the employer and role

- 7.26 Although most learners were happy with the level of information provided on the employer and role, a few learners found that the information was not sufficient to give a clear picture about what the Apprenticeship would entail. This view was echoed by some employers who saw that there was a potential danger of confusing applicants by not distinguishing between Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and large employers. It was felt that learners should understand the difference between the offer of a large multi-national and a small employer before they submit an application. This could include, for instance, details on the total number of sites and employees a company has, and how many employees will be at the site/team where the Apprenticeship will be based.
- 7.27 Some learners expressed concern that they could not understand what the specific Apprenticeship involved from the job description alone. Although there were details about the employer there were in some cases not enough details about the actual job role and specific tasks the individual would be taking. This was seen as a barrier to application as the learner did not understand what they would be doing in practical day to day terms.

Data requirements-learner profile

- 7.28 In regards to the information required in the learner registration and profile, some intermediaries stated that the fields for learner profile are not extensive enough. A number of providers reported they or their employers requested a CV from the learner in addition, in order to get more details and screen candidates more effectively.

Vacancy format and information

- 7.29 Providers had in nearly all cases received some form of training or briefing on using the Apprenticeship vacancies system. However some providers suggested that additional training or guidance would be helpful in order to ensure that the information they upload is as clear and comprehensive as possible. When asked what specific further training they required responses included: hints and tips around wording for vacancies, especially around lesser known job roles (one example given was for the Equine Apprenticeship); further indication of how to complete certain sections in the vacancy advert e.g. 'Future Prospects'; tips on the format and information contained in the Provider Profile.

- 7.30 We recommend that NAS:

- **Review and update the content on the Apprenticeship vacancies system.** Consultation suggests that learners require more detailed content on Apprenticeship Frameworks, employers' types and job roles by industry or sector. It would be advisable to involve SSCs in the creation of sector specific information.

Improving access and further support

Internet access

- 7.31 In terms of overall use of the system, some users interviewed raised the point that internet alone may not be the best communication medium. For many users, the most accessible medium for communication is by mobile phone and text messaging. Some users found it onerous to check emails on a regular basis, for example in order to contact providers about the progress of vacancies or receive alerts from system. Some thought that providers in particular should send text updates rather than, or in addition to, email updates.
- 7.32 Currently there is a facility for sending text messages but as there is no mandatory field for submitting learners' mobile numbers, this facility is not being fully taken advantage of. Some users went further to say that a mobile version of the site would help users who often access the internet from their phones.

User support and discussion facility

- 7.33 Some users raised the issue that they did not have the means to raise questions or issues they have encountered around Apprenticeships nor find or share solutions with other users. It was suggested that a forum on the site would be useful for learners in order to facilitate this taking place.
- 7.34 Our recommendation is that NAS:
- **Enhance the learner experience of the Apprenticeship vacancies system by making it more personalised and interactive.** Create a discussion forum for learners on the system to share information and answer queries. Explore the potential to expand the text message function.

Restriction on applications

- 7.35 At present, the Apprenticeship vacancies system limits each learner to applying for 10 Apprenticeships at a time. There is an argument for this to be increased because each application may remain 'in progress' on the system for several weeks while the employer interviews candidates and makes a decision. Either increasing the maximum number of applications to 15 or restricting the amount of time an employer or provider can take to fill a vacancy should improve the system's functionality.

Wider 'off-line' processes and support

- 7.36 In terms of assessing learner suitability for vacancies, some providers noted that there are limitations with an on-line recruitment system. The main concern was that it is not very personal. Reading the profile information alone does not give providers an accurate view on learner suitability without at least following up with telephone contact or a face-to-face screening interview.
- 7.37 Furthermore, face-to-face contact also means that providers can offer a fuller advice and guidance service to learners, discussing the details of a vacancy with them and suggesting alternatives in cases, for example, where the learner may be unsuitable or has been unsuccessful in previous applications. This is an essential part of the providers' role; however, the Apprenticeship vacancies system as it stands does not facilitate this wider communication and this is likely to take place outside of the online forum.

Addressing Apprenticeship vacancies system work-arounds

- 7.38 Some providers we spoke to reported that in some cases learners were contacting the employer directly to apply for a job and side-stepping the Apprenticeship vacancies system application process, as well as not working with the provider. Several providers we spoke to raised this as a serious issue, as it has resulted in employers being inundated with applications that have not been screened by providers, which causes frustration for the employer and reflects poorly on the provider who is expected to be responsible for managing

applications. One provider commented *“That’s our biggest problem”*. Also, learners were reported to go direct to provider, where previously known, and not register on the system at all. Clearly, although the latter case may not prevent a learner being placed with an employer, it would impact on the efficacy of the MI statistics on registration.

- 7.39 It has been raised as a concern by intermediaries that not all providers are placing their vacancies on the system either. This is either as a result of lack of buy-in of the organisation, as outlined in sections above; or this is also due to the practice of providers having learners ‘on the books’, who have approached them directly or come into contact as a result of an unsuccessful application for another vacancy. Providers in some cases therefore offer new vacancies to these learners, rather than opening them up more widely by placing the vacancy on the Apprenticeship vacancies system.
- 7.40 Whilst not using the Apprenticeship vacancies system in the way it was intended, some of these work-arounds are not necessarily negative as the end result can be the successful matching of a learner to an Apprenticeship vacancy. However this will clearly have an impact on the accuracy of the MI data produced by the system for measuring Apprenticeship engagement more widely.

Section 7 Summary

The key area for improvement is to increase the number of vacancies uploaded onto the system as, without a reasonable number of vacancies to meet expectations, stakeholders are likely to become disengaged. Therefore, key recommendations focus on ways of increasing employer engagement, furthering marketing and awareness raising, and working to ensure providers are fully bought-in to working with the Apprenticeship vacancies system and therefore uploading all their vacancies onto the site.

Other areas for improvement include working more closely with other stakeholders to raise awareness and understanding of the system, and to agree mutually beneficial ways of working.

Finally, the research identified several areas where the information on the website could be improved, and also ways to further support those working with the system.

8 Conclusions and key messages

8.1 This section highlights the key messages about Apprenticeship vacancies system and draws together the conclusions of the report.

Summary of key messages

8.2 Taking into account the findings from our qualitative and quantitative evaluation we can summarise the key messages from our research with various stakeholder groups:

- Learners find the site easy to use and useful for finding out and applying for Apprenticeships, and that it serves as a useful introduction to those with limited previous knowledge of this area. However, this is dependant on learners finding desirable and suitable vacancies on the system.
- Employers that are aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system are happy with the service offered, particularly as an additional advertising route. They see the system as part of their overall approach to engaging apprentices, but not the sole route. Overall the Apprenticeship vacancies system has not been widely publicised or brought to the attention of employers.
- Learning Providers on the whole value the Apprenticeship vacancies system as an additional means to recruit apprentices, and have had training and are using the system. Providers are assessing how to integrate it into their own systems and processes and have had mixed success doing so. Initial usability issues have made the experience less positive for some.
- Participants in the evaluation see Apprenticeship vacancies system as one way in which to inform learners and support their applications for Apprenticeships but not as the sole route of engagement, much of which by its nature needs to take place through other media (e.g. email, telephone and face to face).

Conclusions

8.3 The following conclusions are drawn from the research, relating to the research questions as set out in Section 2:

Main service benefits to users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

8.4 Users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system generally agree that the main service benefit of the system is the facility to provide a one-stop-shop for information on Apprenticeship vacancies and facilities to advertise and apply for them. The online format makes it readily accessible 24 hours a day, and creates equality of opportunity for all learners and employers to make use of the system. Stakeholders also agree that the Apprenticeship vacancies system

has the potential to increase the 'brand' and awareness of Apprenticeships in general, to the benefit of all stakeholders engaging with Apprenticeships.

Issues or difficulties with using the system on a general level

- 8.5 The report identifies several recommendations to improve how the system is used, in response to the difficulties or issues raised by stakeholders with using the system on a general level. However, the main issue at present is the lack of Apprenticeship vacancies to meet demand from learners. This creates the risk of disengaging stakeholders, despite the encouraging response to how useful users find the Apprenticeship vacancies system.
- 8.6 Several stakeholders noted that the success of the Apprenticeship vacancies system hangs on this issue, and is somewhat self-perpetuating; i.e. as the number of vacancies increase, more users (including employers, learning providers and learners) will be encouraged to use the site and its success will grow. On the other hand, if the number of vacancies remains low, interest in the system will quickly fall. It is therefore vital at this early stage that NAS focuses on increasing the number of vacancies on the system.
- 8.7 Drawing on the findings shown in Figure 15 above (page 37), it appears to be equally important that vacancies are in relevant locations and that training is in an area relevant to the learner. Therefore equal care and effort is required to ensure a spread of vacancies on the Apprenticeship vacancies system across sectors and locations.

Affect of Apprenticeship vacancies system on awareness and uptake of Apprenticeships

- 8.8 Whilst both learners and employers can see the benefits of a centralised Apprenticeship system, it is not possible at this stage to ascertain whether the introduction of the Apprenticeship vacancies system has increased the amount of Apprenticeship engagement overall. This is due to the existence of other access routes and lack of MI from which to benchmark an increase in total numbers applying or being recruited.
- 8.9 Nevertheless, the findings from this interim report will be used as a benchmark to build upon in the final report, at which stage there will also be better access to MI to make a comparative analysis of the impact of Apprenticeship vacancies system on wider Apprenticeship engagement.

Further support required to make better use of Apprenticeship vacancies system

- 8.10 The report makes a number of specific recommendations to make better use of the Apprenticeship vacancies system; the focus for these is largely on increasing awareness of the system to key stakeholders and partners (e.g. employers, schools, Jobcentre Plus), and integrating the system into the existing systems used by stakeholders around recruiting Apprenticeships.
- 8.11 A few examples of early good practice in achieving this were identified, but additional support is required from NAS to promote and share this good

practice activity, as well as specific support to end users to ensure the system is used consistently and to maximise the impact of any information uploaded to the site.

9 Appendices

Appendix A: Data from Apprenticeship vacancies system MI and web-trends reports

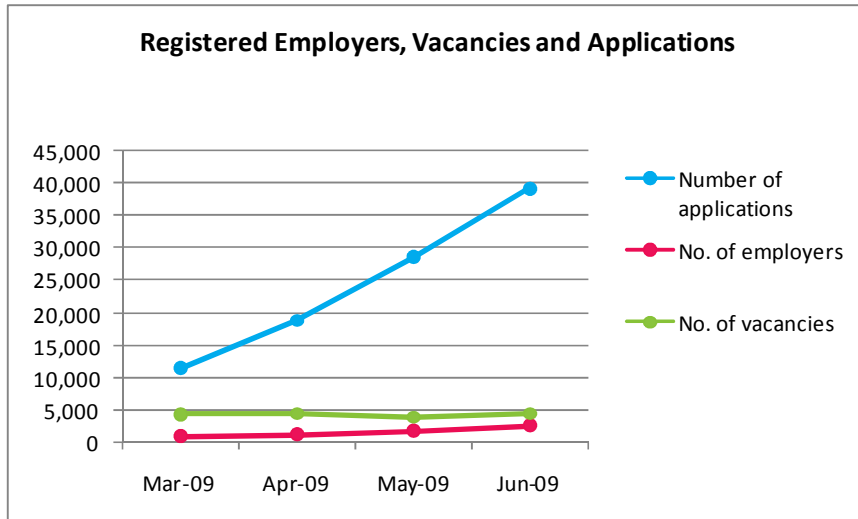


Figure 18: Source, Apprenticeship vacancies system MI Reports

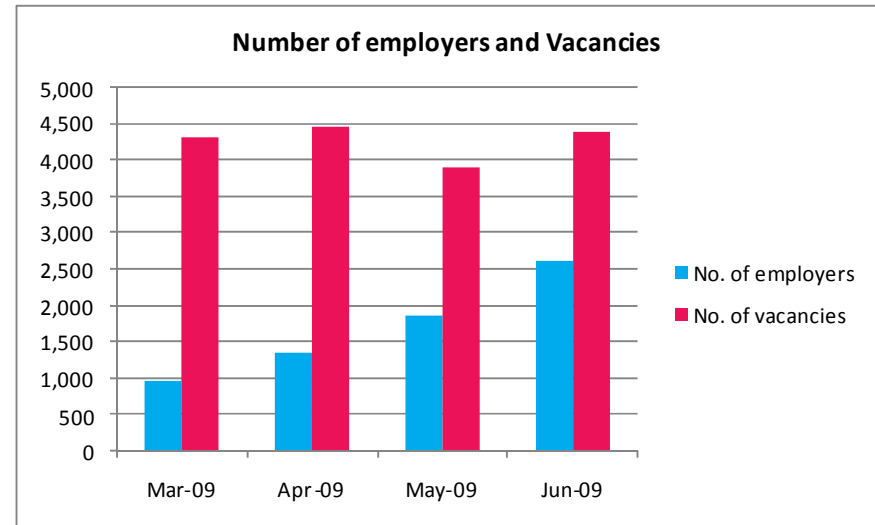


Figure 19: Source, Apprenticeship vacancies system MI Reports

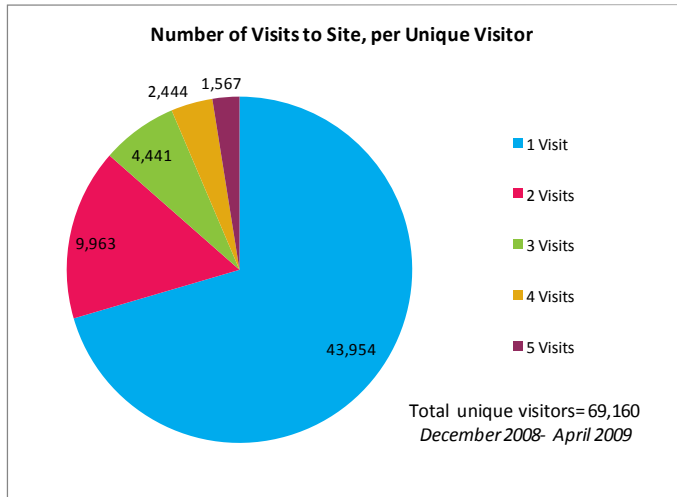


Figure 20: Source, WebTrends Report (Dec 08- Apr 09)

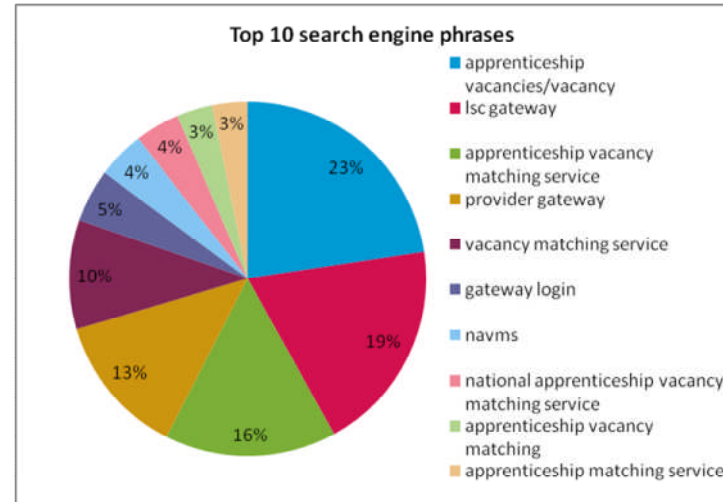


Figure 21: Source, WebTrends Report (Dec 08- Apr 09)

Top 5 sectors with vacancies		
March 2009	April 2009	May 2009
1. Public Services	1. Public services	1. Public services
2. Automotive Industry & Passenger Transport	2. Automotive Industry & Passenger Transport	2. Engineering & Manufacturing Technologies
3. Engineering, Electricians & Building Services	3. Administration & Human Resources	3. Business, Administration & Law
4. Administration & Human Resources	4. Engineering, Electricians & Building Services	4. Construction, Planning & the built Environment
5. Information Technology & Communications	5. Customer Service & Retail	5. Retail & Commercial Enterprise

Table 4: Source, Apprenticeship vacancies system MI reports

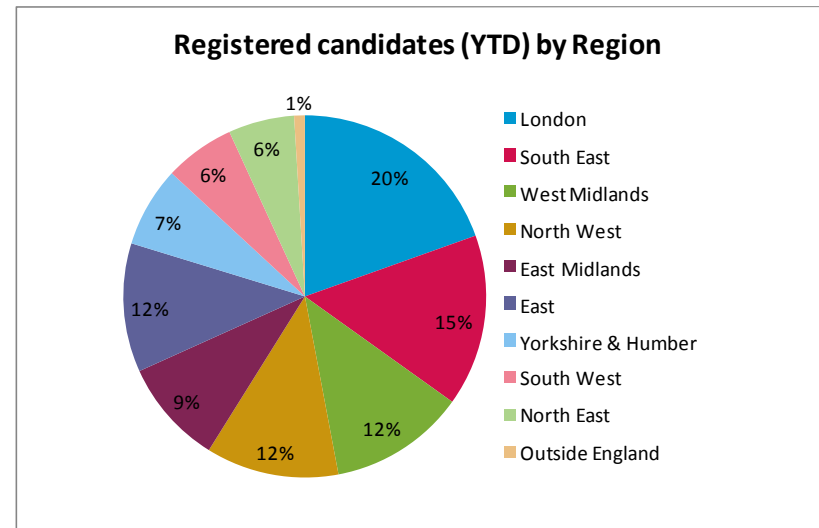


Figure 22: Source, Apprenticeship vacancies system MI Reports

Appendix B: Bibliography

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