



# Evaluation of the Apprenticeship Vacancies System

Learning and Skills Council and  
National Apprenticeship Service

Abigail Diamond

Alice Jones

Paul Casey

**For more information about this report please contact Abigail Diamond:**

CFE Phoenix Yard, Upper Brown Street, Leicester LE1 5TE  
T:0116 229 3300 [abigail.diamond@cfe.org.uk](mailto:abigail.diamond@cfe.org.uk) [www.cfe.org.uk](http://www.cfe.org.uk)

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# 1 | Executive summary

The report presents the findings from a longitudinal evaluation of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, carried out between April 2009 and March 2010.

The report draws together findings from primary research with users and secondary research and aims to:

- > Outline the extent to which the Apprenticeship vacancies system has been used by various stakeholders, and its perceived value;
- > Evaluate the success of the Apprenticeship vacancies system in facilitating matching between potential apprentices and employers, and the impact on overall Apprenticeship numbers;
- > Explore and make recommendations regarding the future development of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, including a summary of any necessary functionality developments which remain outstanding.

## Context

The National Apprenticeship Service was launched in April 2009, to provide a customer-facing service for learners and employers and to oversee the delivery process. The NAS 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 the Apprenticeship vacancies system, which provides one central web-based location for learners seeking Apprenticeships and employers offering them.

The Apprenticeship vacancies system was launched in January 2009, and so this evaluation covers the first year of its operation.

## Key findings

The following points summarise the key findings of the evaluation across the various user groups:

- > The Apprenticeship vacancies system was established to provide one central clearing house and matching service for Apprenticeships. The system has been successful in engaging learners to create a pool of potential apprentices, with significant numbers of learner registrations and applications to date. Learners value the system as it is easy to use, it provides useful information about real Apprenticeships and it is seen to be considerably simpler than previous ad hoc methods for searching and applying for Apprenticeships.
- > However, the Apprenticeship vacancies system has not had the equivalent effect with regard to engaging providers and employers offering Apprenticeships. The system is modelled on the basis of providers acting as the central party in uploading vacancies onto the system; but difficulties in integrating the system with providers' business models and practices, compounded by functional challenges, have made using the system time consuming and an additional administrative burden. This has resulted in many providers not uploading the majority of their Apprenticeship vacancies onto the system.
- > The Apprenticeship vacancies system aims to streamline the process of recruiting apprentices for employers, but has in practice isolated them from the system. This is partly through the design of the system which puts the provider-learner relationship at the centre; and partly as a result of provider behaviour in non use of the system and lack of communication with employers regarding when and how the system is being used on their

behalf. As a result, awareness of the system is low amongst employers and their views on how useful the system is are fairly neutral. A lower than expected number of employers have advertised vacancies on the system.

- > Other stakeholders, particularly Connexions and nextstep, value the Apprenticeship vacancies system as a means of sourcing information on local Apprenticeship opportunities from one central place. However, this depends on there being enough relevant vacancies for them to be able to confidently advise learners to use it, which is not always the case given the current low number of vacancies available.

## Recommendations

The Apprenticeship vacancies system has had significant benefits for learners, and for NAS in engaging learners and maintaining their involvement. If employer engagement and usage of the Apprenticeship vacancies system were to approach anything like the same levels as learners, then the system could have substantial benefits in creating a much more co-ordinated, liquid market. Employers would have access to a wider pool of applicants, applicants a wider range of opportunities, and the prospect of better matching could in turn lead to better outcomes for the public investment in Apprenticeships.

However, the original vision for the system, as a central clearinghouse and matching system for employers and potential apprentices, has yet to be fully realised. The current design focuses on the learner-provider relationship, and does not give due recognition to the critical role of employers in creating successful Apprenticeship vacancy matches.

Learner engagement is very positive because the system offers a convenient means of accessing a wider range of Apprenticeship vacancies. For employers and providers, the experience is less positive – the design reflects limited consideration of how the system could be made to benefit them. The consequence is that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is successful in drawing in learners' applications, but does not come close to creating the level of provider and employer engagement to match that demand.

A number of recommendations for the future strategic and practical development of the Apprenticeship vacancies system are set out below:

**Recommendation 1:** Consider the role of the Apprenticeship vacancies system within the evolving Apprenticeship marketplace and NAS' operating model. Draw upon this evaluation, but also other models in the commercial sector (e.g. online recruitment services, online application services), to define a blueprint for the development of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, on the basis of robust analysis. Through the same review, estimate the costs and benefits of different change options, to identify where and how change to the vacancies system might best contribute to NAS' objectives.

**Recommendation 2:** Employers could have a much more direct role in using the Apprenticeship vacancies system, allowing them to upload their vacancies and manage them directly. This would need to take into consideration the roles of other intermediaries (e.g. providers and NAS advisors) in supporting and screening employers, and the security of personal data collected through the system. A potential model is to allow employers to have direct access to certain areas of their account, such as vacancy descriptions and candidate applications, in addition to providers' administrative access.

**Recommendation 3:** A wider range of partners should be able to access and update employer vacancies, including Connexions, nextstep and Jobcentre Plus employer engagement staff. This would help in the task of making the system a central clearinghouse – as with employers and providers, making the Apprenticeship vacancies system of benefit to partners should be a key design principle if it is to be successful.

**Recommendation 4:** Service levels for employer enquiries and ongoing relationship management should be reviewed, along with their management and monitoring arrangements, to ensure they are suitably responsive and supportive. As NAS itself evolves its operating model and delivery processes, its support resources need to develop to meet the requirements they create.

**Recommendation 5:** Consider whether integration with other platforms would be a more cost-effective and simple solution for ongoing recruitment systems for Apprenticeships. As a minimum, ensure that parallel systems (such as Jobcentre Plus and Connexions recruitment sites, and Common Applications Process site) are compatible and data is effectively shared between them; certainly, where possible, the need for duplicating data entry should be kept to a minimum.

**Recommendation 6:** Review the current customer journey for employers using the system to identify incremental changes which could reduce or combine low-value-add stages, improve completion times, and raise responsiveness.

**Recommendation 7:** Continue to review functionality with providers, learners and stakeholders including Sector Skills Councils following the changes for Release 4, and implement further functional changes, focused on improving their experience. Focus especially on improving application data collection to reduce the common practice of requesting additional CVs, improving communication with external provider and employer systems, and improving sector-specific functionality (e.g. search categorisation and key words).

**Recommendation 8:** Review the potential for functional changes to the system needed to facilitate positive practice in e-recruitment of disabled users, including for example the display of commitment to the Jobcentre Plus Disability Symbol.

## 2 | Introduction

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 of the success of the Apprenticeship vacancies system to all stakeholders.

This final report presents the findings from two phases of a longitudinal evaluation. The first phase took place with early users of the system between April and July 2009, and the second phase between November 2009 and February 2010 after a year of operation of the system. This report compares and builds on the findings from the interim report, which was published on the national Apprenticeships website ([www.Apprenticeships.org](http://www.Apprenticeships.org)) in July 2009.

### Apprenticeships context

#### The National Apprenticeship Service

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 2008). NAS has been created as a single, dedicated service for Apprenticeships; delivering Apprenticeships is a complex matter, involving learners, employers and learning providers as a minimum, but also involving awarding bodies, Sector Skills Councils, Ofsted, Connexions and many others. The purpose of NAS is therefore to provide a single customer-facing point of contact where employers and learners can go if they are interested in an Apprenticeship. NAS therefore has end-to-end responsibility for the delivery of Apprenticeships.

This purpose is reflected in the organisational design of the NAS, which includes teams for Employer Services, Learner Services and Apprenticeship vacancies at a national and regional level. NAS has around 400 employees, the majority of whom are based in regional offices and whose primary role is to be outward facing, engaging directly with employers and those who advise learners (particularly schools and the Connexions service). The Apprenticeship vacancies team connects these two elements, by aiming to provide an efficient way of bringing employers and potential apprentices together.

NAS therefore has responsibility for achieving Government targets for Apprenticeships in England, including:

- > Increasing Apprenticeship take-up, exceeding the Leitch target of 250,000 starts per year by 2020, and aiming to achieve 360,000 starts per year by this date;<sup>1</sup>
- > Making Apprenticeships a mainstream option for young people, with one in five 16-18 year olds to undertake an Apprenticeship in the next decade, and meeting the entitlement to an Apprenticeship place for all suitably qualified 16-19 year olds from 2013;
- > Almost doubling the number of Advanced Apprenticeships for 19-30 year olds, to achieve the ambition that three quarters of people should participate in higher education or complete an Advanced Apprenticeship or equivalent technician level course by the age of 30.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 'Skills for Growth: the National Skills Strategy' (November 2009) p28

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, as outlined in the *Skills for Growth*<sup>2</sup> report (November 2009).

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 has increased since formation of the National Apprenticeship Service in April 2009, spearheaded by a major marketing campaign featuring Lord Alan Sugar (launched in February 2009). Awareness-raising and marketing has been targeted towards all stakeholders, with an initial focus upon employer engagement. In October and November 2009 NAS launched the *Good for Business* campaign, which sought to increase the number of Apprenticeships available by emphasising the benefits and added value that Apprenticeships can bring to business.

More recently, NAS has organised the *Apprenticeship Week 2010*, to further drive forward key messages around the value of Apprenticeships. This involved multiple information events held within each region, including presentations in schools and colleges, meetings and forums in local Connexions. The focus of the week was on the value of Apprenticeship to businesses; as part of this the Apprenticeship vacancies system was promoted as a tool for employers to find good candidates. Whilst Apprenticeship vacancies was promoted for the main part as part of a larger toolkit for Apprenticeships, some events focused explicitly on the system, such as the use of an IT equipped bus to provide mobile taster sessions for prospective applicants. Information relating to Apprenticeships week, including marketing and information materials for the Apprenticeship vacancies system, was accessible for all via an online “hub” on the Apprenticeships website.

## Role and objectives of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

The fundamental purpose of the Apprenticeship vacancies system is to streamline the process of matching potential apprentices with employers offering Apprenticeships, by providing a responsive and supportive mechanism for employers and learners. By having a single web-based location, the aim is to make it easier for potential apprentices to identify opportunities and to broaden the pool of such candidates for employers to choose from. In a message to providers, the Deputy Chief Executive of the NAS, David Way, stated that “*Apprenticeship vacancies was a personal commitment by the Prime Minister who wanted a UCAS style clearing house arrangement for Apprenticeships*”.<sup>3</sup> The original vision was therefore to create one place where employers and learners would go to be matched appropriately.

A secondary aim for the system was to assist NAS in meeting demands, by providing information on the Apprenticeships that people are looking for and the employers that are offering them. This information will also be shared with other planning and funding organisations following the changes to the Machinery of Government, namely the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and Young People’s Learning Agency (YPLA).

The Apprenticeship vacancies system is designed to compliment NAS’s role as a single point to bring together the parties involved in delivering an Apprenticeship; primarily the learner, employer and learning provider. The Apprenticeship vacancies team oversee the management of the system in close partnership with Apprenticeship providers, supported by colleagues from Employer and Learner Services teams who are working to support their customers through the process.

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<sup>2</sup> BIS, *Skills for Growth* (November 2009)

<sup>3</sup> David Way, Deputy Chief Executive of the NAS, in a message to the Association of Learning Providers. See <http://www.tsnla.org.uk/content/message-Apprenticeship-providers>

In translating this into a conceptual design for the system, the model is based on the operational principle that learning providers are at the centre of delivery of the Apprenticeship, as the key intermediary between employers and learners. An overview of the operational structure for the Apprenticeship vacancies system is set out in Figure 1.

However in translating the original vision into an operational model, it became clear that the 'matching' element was not explicitly provided by the system itself. In practice the Apprenticeship vacancies system provides the information from which learners can self-select which vacancies they are interested in, and providers and employers can use the information about these candidates as a basis for further selection processes. Therefore the matching of candidates to employers actually takes place outside of the system itself, but is facilitated by the sharing of information and initial contact between parties that it provides. This has been recognised by NAS, and as a result the name has changed from the Apprenticeship 'Vacancy Matching Service', to the 'Apprenticeship vacancies' system.

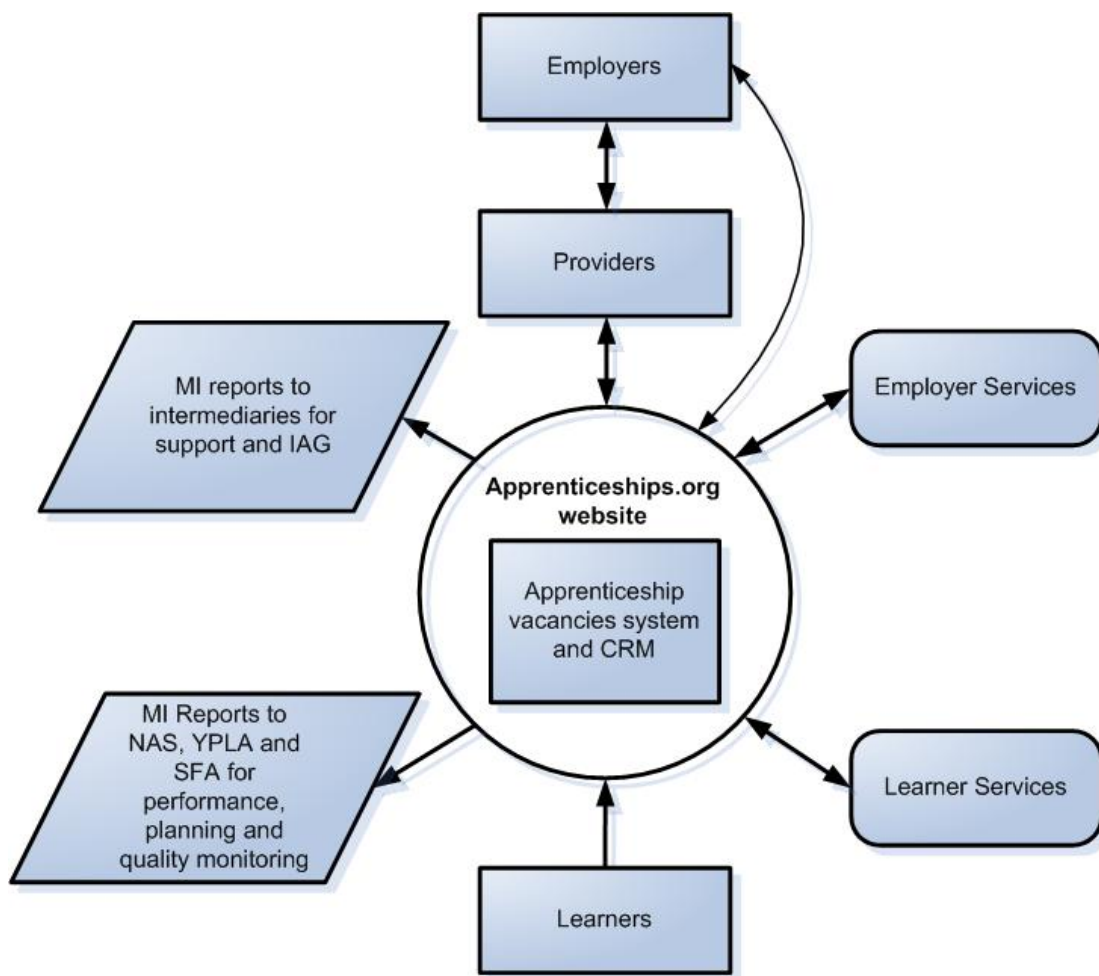


Figure 1: Apprenticeship vacancies system strategic overview

NAS has a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in relation to the Apprenticeship vacancies system. NAS aims to achieve the following objectives for the academic year 2009/10 (August 2009 – July 2010):

- > 30,000 posted vacancies
- > 7,000 new employers posting their first vacancy
- > 60 percent of completed vacancies being filled by a successful candidate

The Apprenticeship vacancies system in the form that it now exists is set up to benefit various groups in the following ways:<sup>4</sup>

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

**Table 1: Expected benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system**

## This report

This report sets out the findings from the research with users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, focusing on key stakeholder groups including learners, employers, providers and other stakeholders (e.g. schools, Connexions, nextstep and Jobcentre Plus). The report draws together findings from primary research with stakeholders and secondary desk-based research, to investigate the extent to which the Apprenticeship vacancies system has been used and explore the benefits to users, and to evaluate the success of the system in facilitating matching between employers and learners, including recommendations for further improvements.

The report aims to provide the latest feedback to NAS and Government on the value of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, and suggest indicative effects of the system on wider Apprenticeship engagement. Findings from the first phase of research are used as a benchmark and built upon in the second phase of research and final report.

After this introduction the rest of the report is structured as follows: **Section 3** gives an overview of the evaluation objectives and approach; **Section 4** looks at the take up of Apprenticeship vacancies system; **Section 5** explores how users have found using the system and how useful it has proved to date; **Section 6** reviews users' overall satisfaction with the system; **Section 7** expands on how the system is perceived and being used in practice, including areas of good practice; **Section 8** gives indicative findings on how the Apprenticeship vacancies system may influence Apprenticeship engagement; **Section 9** outlines key findings and recommendations; **Appendices** include data from the Apprenticeship vacancies system Summary Data and WebTrends Reports and Bibliography.

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from project specification, February 2009.

### 3 | Evaluation objectives and approach

Between April 2009 and February 2010, CFE conducted two phases of mixed-method research with a variety of stakeholders, in order to evaluate the success and impact of the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

Both phases of research adopted four key stages consisting of qualitative and quantitative research methods, as outlined below.

- > Stage 1: Desk-based research to analyse monthly Management Information (MI) and Webtrends reports relevant to the Apprenticeship vacancies system
- > Stage 2: Qualitative depth interviews with key stakeholders involved in an advisory or implementation capacity for Apprenticeships
- > Stage 3: Discussion groups held with learning providers and learners, supplemented with additional depth interviews
- > Stage 4: Quantitative online surveys with learners and employers

The data collected from the first phase of research was used to construct an interim report of findings and recommendations, published on the Apprenticeships website in July 2009. This information was used to inform and shape the delivery of the second phase of research, providing a baseline for this final report.

#### Research aim and objectives

The principal aim of this research was to *evaluate the success of the Apprenticeship vacancies system*, ensuring that the following key objectives are addressed:

- > Describe the main service benefits to users engaged with Apprenticeship vacancies, including learners, employers, providers and other stakeholders;
- > Provide an understanding of any issues or difficulties experienced by users of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, including accessibility issues faced by disabled users, and identify where further support is needed to ensure the best use of the system;
- > Highlight where Apprenticeship vacancies adds value to the Apprenticeship recruitment process, and indicate the extent to which this may have affected the total number of Apprenticeship starts nationally. This should include the effect of Apprenticeship vacancies on starts amongst candidates from diverse backgrounds, specifically Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) candidates;
- > Establish perceptions and awareness of the system and Apprenticeships more broadly (and factors that influence their uptake).

Initially we aimed to incorporate stakeholder views on usability and functionality within our findings; however these areas have already been covered by studies carried out by S-Cool with Apprenticeship candidates and providers. The project aims and objectives were reviewed in phase 1 in light of this.

## Overview of approach

The following sections set out how the fieldwork was conducted in each phase, giving account to any difference in scope or execution.

### Desk research

CFE carried out a preliminary review of existing research and documentation at the outset of the project. Throughout both phases we analysed key information from Management Information reports and headline usage summaries provided monthly by NAS. This provided statistical insight into Apprenticeship uptake and engagement between learners and employers for the duration of the project. CFE also reviewed alternative online routes to Apprenticeship engagement such as recruitment websites, regional Connexions resources, third sector websites, and employers own online recruitment tools, to establish a benchmark of the existing Apprenticeship recruitment market against which the Apprenticeship vacancies system could be compared.

### Depth interviews

CFE conducted 56 depth telephone interviews, comprising of 28 interviews in each phase of the research with the following key stakeholders:

- > Connexions
- > Learning Providers
- > nextstep
- > Sector Skills Councils
- > Jobcentre Plus
- > Employers
- > Schools

The interviews were used to collect qualitative views on the success and impact of the system, and lasted around 45 minutes each. Where possible, a regional spread of responses was gathered across the country, either by LSC region or across North/Midlands/South.

### Provider discussion groups

CFE conducted a total of eight two-hour discussion groups with learning providers, incorporating a range of small and large providers, colleges and private learning providers (including a number of multi region providers). The aim was to explore provider viewpoints on the success of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, allowing opportunity to discuss benefits, good practice and potential issues with use. Where possible, we aimed to organise groups in conjunction with existing Provider Network meetings, in order to ensure a reasonable spread of attendees could take part.

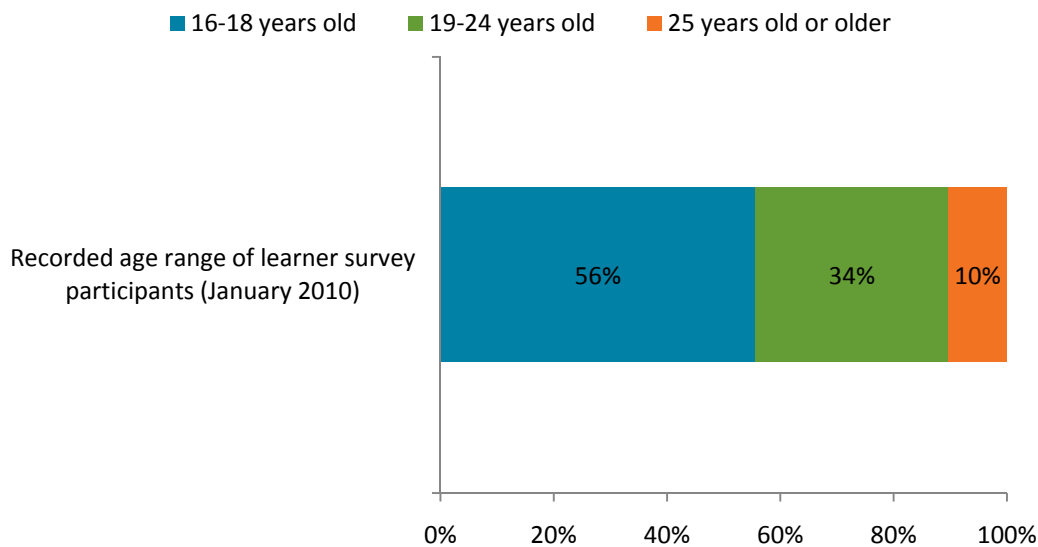
### Learner discussion groups and interviews

CFE conducted a total of three discussion groups with learners and 12 individual depth interviews across the two phases. The focus groups lasted approximately two hours, and participants were all under 25 years of age, mostly aged between 16 and 18. For the first phase, recruitment was achieved via an advertisement on the Apprenticeships website; the geographical disparity of responses meant that individual depth interviews were more achievable. In phase two, CFE recruited directly through an independent provider and Connexions. The pre-existing relationship between providers and current users was beneficial in ensuring that we had enough candidates attending. However, we opted to conduct five depth interviews to ensure that our qualitative responses included users with a diverse range of experiences, including those not matched successfully.

## Learner online survey

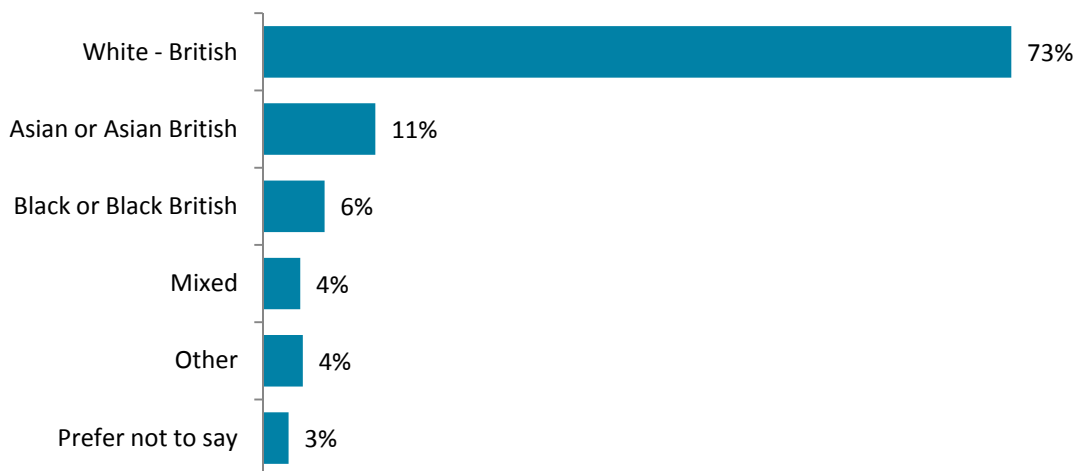
CFE conducted a quantitative online survey in two phases in May 2009 and January 2010, with a total of 1,313 learners. The survey explored learner awareness, ease of use and identified any support needed to use the system. 489 learners took part in the survey in the first phase, and 824 took part in the second phase.

With regard to gender, males (57 percent) represented a greater proportion of respondents than females (43 percent). Respondents tended to be in younger age categories; over half of all respondents were aged between 16 and 18 years old, and over a third were aged between 19 and 24 years old. See Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Recorded age of learners who participated in the online survey, at time of survey (Jan 2010).** Source: Learner Online Survey (Base= 1313)

In terms of ethnicity, people of white British origin made up the overwhelming majority of respondents at 73 percent, with the remaining 27 percent falling into several self-declared categories as shown in Figure 3.

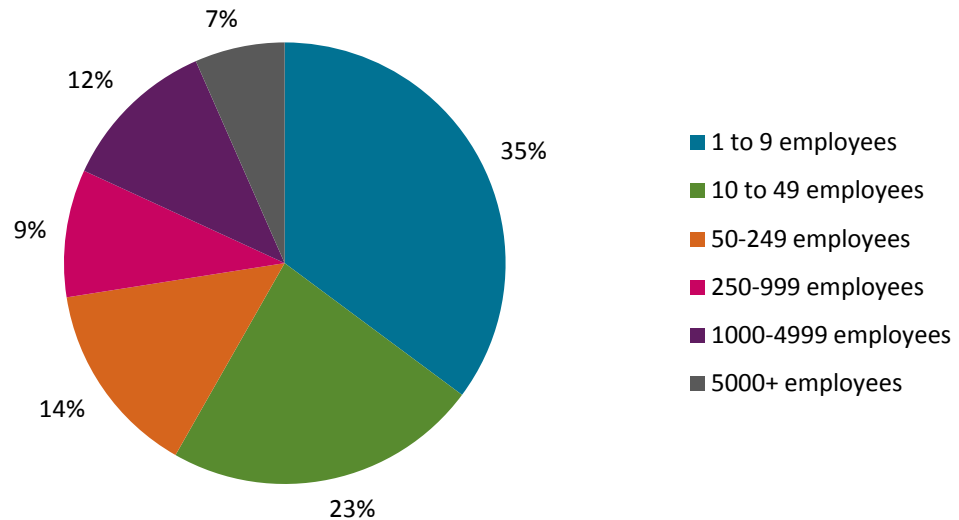


**Figure 3: Self declared ethnicity of respondents to the Learner Online Survey.** Source: Learner Online Survey (Base= 1313)

## Employer online survey

CFE conducted a quantitative online survey in two phases (May 2009 and January 2010) with a total of 187 employers, in order to assess levels of employer awareness about Apprenticeships and the Apprenticeship vacancies system in general, and their experience of the wider service around the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

Employers who participated were broadly spread around the English regions, with no particular region returning a significantly higher number of respondents than another across either phase. The majority of responses received were from small and medium sized businesses, although large sized employers were represented also. See Figure 4.



**Figure 4: Company size by number of employees for respondents to phase 1 and 2 employer survey.**  
Source: Employer Online Survey (Base= 182)

A number of difficulties were raised in finding a suitable sample and sampling frame for contacting employers for the research. This has impacted on the quality of the data from employers. Although employer details are recorded on NAS's CRM, the full database was not available for this research.

For the first phase, employers were recruited via a snowball sampling approach, where providers were asked to forward the survey to their employer contacts. This raised a number of methodological caveats, as outlined in the interim report, and impacted on the quality of the data.

For the phase two employer survey the sampling approach was changed. Contacts for employers who had been engaged by Employer Services were provided by the NAS. From this a convenience sample was taken. However, not all of the population of interest offered Apprenticeships or had used the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Nevertheless, a more representative sample was achieved than the first phase, with highest responses from Construction (13 percent), Manufacturing (12 percent) and Wholesale and Retail Trade (11 percent). However, as a result of lack of access to employers who have used the system, some of the bases for specific questions on experiences of the system are low.

## 4 | Take up

This section examines the take up of the Apprenticeship vacancies system over the year since its launch, looking at levels of engagement and routes for raising awareness amongst learners, employers, providers and other stakeholders.

A broader picture of the marketplace for Apprenticeship recruitment, and therefore the context into which the Apprenticeship vacancies system was introduced, is explored by reviewing other resources available for advertising and applying for Apprenticeships. This provides a benchmark for comparison between previous/alternative resources and the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

### Engagement with the Apprenticeship vacancies system

#### Learners' take up

Data from the Apprenticeship vacancies system Management Information (MI) and Webtrends reports show that usage of the system continues to increase considerably. From the launch in January 2009 to January 2010, the number of learners registered on the system has substantially grown to a total of 230,610 registrations, averaging 37 percent growth month to month. Over this period there have been over a million visits to the Apprenticeship vacancies webpage from 262,000 unique visitors, with an average of 2,904 visits per day to the system; this has been increasing over this time, as shown in Figure 33 in Appendix 1.

There has also been an increase in the proportion (and therefore number) of learners applying for positions. In the first month of operation (January 2009) 11 percent of registered learners made an application, but by January 2010 this was 18 percent of registered learners; this proportion peaked in August 2009 (in line with the beginning of the new academic year) but has settled at an average of 18 percent since October 2009. Of those making applications, between January – May 2009 candidates submitted an average of two applications; from June 2009 – January 2010 this increased to an average of three applications per learner.

#### Providers' and employers' take up

NAS has proactively coordinated the roll out of the system to Apprenticeship providers, and information collected by regional NAS teams in November 2009 found that 86 percent of Apprenticeship providers had a profile uploaded on the Apprenticeship vacancies system. However, a large proportion of those consulted and wider feedback from the network indicated that providers are not actively using the system to upload vacancies, with the majority of those consulted only uploading a small number of their total opportunities onto the system, if any.

This has impacted on the number of employers and vacancies on the Apprenticeship vacancies system, as providers for the most part act as intermediaries on behalf of employers. At the time of the interim report, only a few employers were registered as advertising on the system; this has increased considerably, but levels remain fairly low. As of January 2010, a total of 7,410 employers had registered with vacancies on the system, up from 2,610 in June 2009 at the time of the interim report. By January 2010 the total number of vacancies uploaded to the system since its creation numbered 32,730.

The number of Apprenticeship vacancies on the system available each month fluctuates, as new vacancies are added and others are filled or pass their closing date. The number of vacancies available at the end of each month since the launch has ranged from a low of 1,290 in August

2009, to a high of 8,000 in January 2010. Throughout the period January 2009 to January 2010 there were, on average, 4,551 vacancies available per month.

There is therefore a considerable imbalance between supply and demand on the system. To recap, the latest available data (up until January 2010) shows that there were 230,610 registered candidates, of whom 41,630 have applied to a vacancy, with a total of 121,490 applications between them; however the total cumulative number of vacancies on the system during this period only amounts to 32,730. The number of learners registering and applying significantly outweighs the number of vacancies on offer (See Appendix A, Figure 30). For example, in January 2010, 15,620 applications were received for a total of 9,608 vacancies that were live during that month. While the number of vacancies available is currently also at an all time high, four times this figure registered in January 2010 alone.

### Matches via the system

The number of successful matches each month steadily increased throughout the year, with an average of 675 matches per month between April 2009 and January 2010. This peaked in December 2009 with 2,370 matches; this is explained by a high volume of vacancies from a large public sector employer being filled during that month (See Figure 31 in Appendix A). The latest MI reports indicate that the total number of successfully matched candidates is 6,750 up to January 2010.

Currently 52 percent of vacancies that have been advertised on the system (where the vacancy has been completed and fully processed) have been filled by a successful candidate. This is just under NAS' KPI which aims for 60 percent of completed vacancies advertised to be filled by a successful candidate. NAS is also engaged in ongoing work to enable accurate data collection on the number of candidates filling positions, who found it using the Apprenticeship vacancies system but may have completed the application process outside of the Applications Ladder in the system, for instance on the employer's own website.

Although it is very positive to see that the number of successful matches is steadily increasing, this is still a small fraction of learners who are registered or have applied through the system. The lack of vacancies to meet demand and the low number of successful matches in comparison with application numbers has a very real effect on learners using the system. In our interviews both learners and Connexions/nextstep staff supporting them reported that this has a negative impact on learners' engagement with the system and with Apprenticeships:

*"I think the concern from PAs [Personal Advisers] are the young people this year, who have registered, and then basically there have been no vacancies ... they've been registered ... and then nothing's happened. If the word starts to get round then it dissuades young people from registering, or coming back in the system"* Connexions interviewee

*"The number of vacancies that are on ... there's actually not much [available] for the area and that kind of disincentives them to use it further."* Nextstep interviewee

Providers also noted that as a result of the scarcity of vacancies available, they have had very high response rates to those Apprenticeships advertised. One provider interviewed in 2009 reported receiving 237 applications from just 13 vacancies. This clearly leads to a high number of unsuccessful candidates, who providers do their best to manage by directing them to other vacancies or courses.

This is also supported by findings from the learner online survey. In the first phase of the evaluation, it was reported that 34 percent of registered learners (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. The phase two survey asked the same question and, encouragingly, the proportion of registered learners who had not applied for an Apprenticeship declined to only 7 percent of 824

respondents. However, when asked why they had not applied, the most popular answer was again that 'there were no suitable vacancies in the job role I am interested in'. The second most popular response was that 'there were no suitable vacancies in a suitable location'.

## Awareness of the system

A key priority outlined in the National Apprenticeship Service prospectus is the delivery of a wide-ranging marketing and communications strategy that ensures all stakeholders are aware of the benefits of Apprenticeships. The Apprenticeship vacancies system has not featured explicitly in this marketing campaign, but the marketing does direct stakeholders to the Apprenticeships website, containing a link to the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

Since the interim research, further steps have been taken to directly raise awareness of the Apprenticeship vacancies system including the production of information flyers for employers and learners about the system, which are available on the Campaign Resources site. NAS has focused on rolling out the system by working primarily with providers and Connexions, through a number of training and information sessions run by regional NAS staff. NAS regional Employer Services managers have also been actively engaging with local employers. These have been the initial points of contact, to then raise awareness with learners and employers.

NAS has also recently launched a suite of e-learning tools for providers, learners and partners advising learners. These take users through the main areas of the system, providing training and support for using various functions of the system.

In due course NAS intends to engage with other stakeholders who are directly working with potential apprentices, including Jobcentre Plus and nextstep, but to date these have not been a national priority. These are key partners in widening access to Apprenticeships to older learners, as will be necessary with the commitment to higher number of Advanced Apprenticeships in the future. Some regional NAS staff have in some cases built on existing communications with these partners, such as regional stakeholder meetings, where some regional awareness raising has taken place.

The section below outlines the evidence showing levels of awareness and how each stakeholder group was first made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system:

### Learners

To establish media by which awareness of Apprenticeships in general is raised, respondents were asked if they had ever seen advertisements about Apprenticeships in a variety of sources. The most popular media node was the internet. This was followed by seeing advertisements at Connexions offices, then on the television or radio, followed by school or college. It is interesting to note that traditional media platforms scored lowly, with lowest awareness through newspapers; posters and billboards; and magazines which the respondents read.

The most popular way for learner respondents (28 percent) to first find out about Apprenticeship vacancies system was directly from the Apprenticeships website ([www.Apprenticeships.org.uk](http://www.Apprenticeships.org.uk)). This percentage has remained consistent since the interim phase of research. 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) – nearly half of all respondents (48 percent) 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 quarter of respondents (25 percent) had found out about the Apprenticeship vacancies system via the Connexions service. Only 3 percent of respondents stated that they found out about the system from more conventional media, such as television,

radio, press, posters etc. This may increase however, given the recently higher level of marketing and campaigning aimed at learners. See Figure 5.

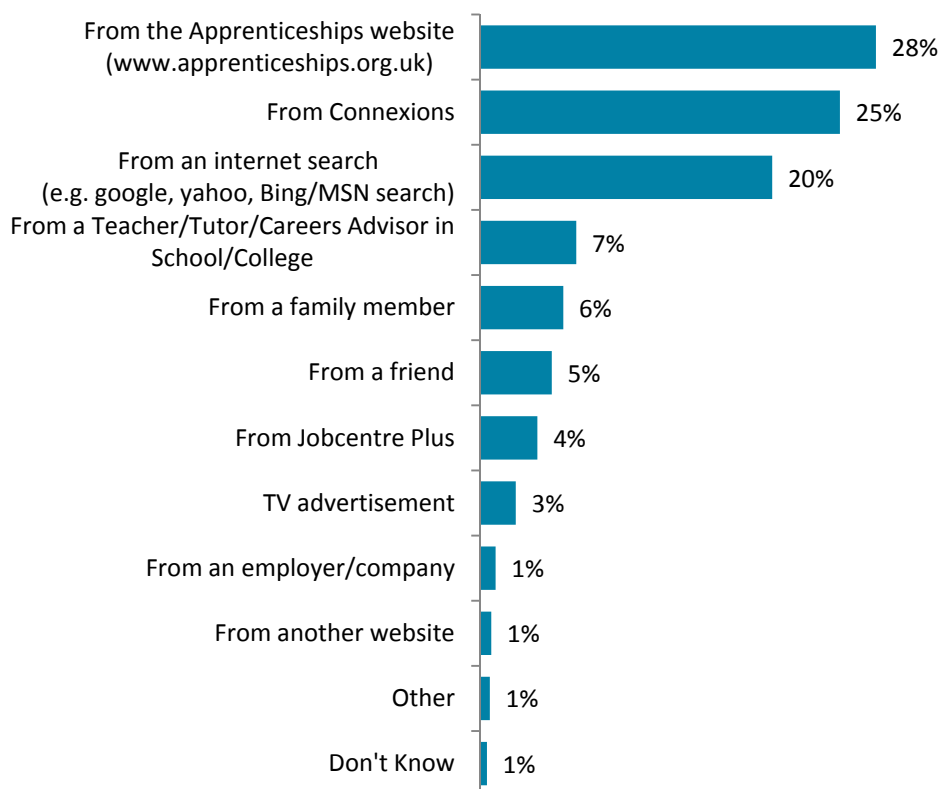


Figure 5: How did you first hear about the Apprenticeship vacancies system? Source: Learner Online Survey (Base= 824)

### Providers

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

Consultation with providers shows that providers have either received training on the system by attending events held by NAS or they have learnt internally, via colleagues, or on their own self initiative. In the majority of cases, this training has been adequate for providers to understand how to use the system. In addition, some providers have had individual visits from NAS staff to assist use, and a training manual has also been produced which has been updated as the system has been updated. Providers indicate that these resources are generally sufficient.

*'I didn't have any training so I think there's a handbook ... that I actually went through, and it seemed fine. It's clear with print screens how you do the different processes, so I picked it up fairly easily.'* Provider focus group participant.

### Employers

Just over half of employers surveyed were aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. However, this figure is unlikely to be representative of the employer population as a whole, as the source of the sample from NAS is over-representative of employers offering or considering offering Apprenticeships compared to the national average. Therefore it is highly likely that

employer awareness of the Apprenticeship vacancies system is much lower. This is supported by qualitative feedback from providers that most do not actively promote the Apprenticeship vacancies system to their employers.

Of the 67 respondents who were aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, nearly a third (22) stated that they had found out about it from the Apprenticeships.org.uk website. A further 11 had found out from the LSC’s National Apprenticeship Service team. The third most popular way to find out about the Apprenticeship vacancies system was via an internet search engine, such as Google, Yahoo etc. See Figure 6.

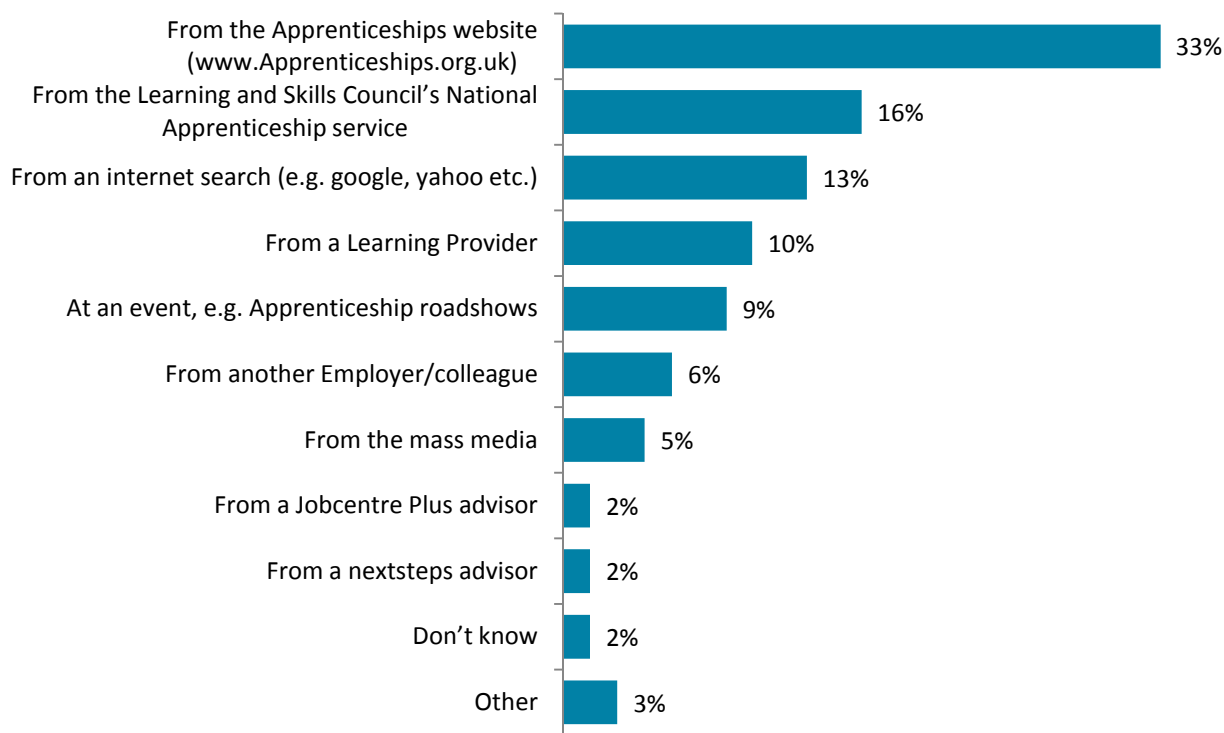


Figure 6: How did you first find out about the Apprenticeship vacancies system? Source: Employer Online Survey (Base= 120)

### Other stakeholders

As outlined earlier, raising awareness with Connexions staff has been a priority for NAS. From the qualitative interviews, Connexions staff were made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system via their regional LSC/NAS team; some were involved in early stage consultations and development of the system through a pilot, whilst others received briefings or training sessions from NAS at a later date. Overall, Connexions interviewees were positive about the quality and degree of information on offer:

*“The minute the marketing materials came out I got an email about all that, and then I could send it out to all our people. We’ve just always been kept informed. I probably have a couple of emails a day from my contacts at the National Apprenticeship Service. “Oh, have you seen this” or, “This is on”, and, “We’re doing this”, or, “How can we work together on a particular thing?”. So it’s quite a good working relationship, so far”*  
 Connexions interviewee

General partnership building activity between NAS and Jobcentre Plus is currently taking place at a national level. Plans are underway to develop a framework between NAS and Jobcentre Plus to enable frontline staff to be able to effectively signpost clients to relevant resources, including the Apprenticeship vacancies system. This is part of a broader strategy for more

closely integrating Government-funded employer and employment services, including Jobcentre Plus, NAS, and Business Link. Materials giving Jobcentre Plus staff the information they need to be able to signpost to the Apprenticeship vacancies system will be rolled out to all frontline staff from spring 2010. Evidence from qualitative interviews suggests that awareness amongst frontline Jobcentre Plus staff is therefore low at present, although some regional staff have met with NAS teams to begin initial discussions on how they can work together.

There has not been a national engagement programme for nextstep from NAS to date, although regional staff have in some cases started to engage with local partners. The nextstep staff interviewed indicated that they were made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system via a variety of sources. One received information from a Connexions contact; another attended a briefing/workshop from NAS. Some were given training sessions from a learner's perspective on using the system. There was a perception from two interviewees that because the initial focus of the system has been on 16-18 year olds, due to the general policy emphasis on Apprenticeship targets for this age group<sup>5</sup> *“there was very much a feeling that that was just for young people and, therefore, there was no need for adult advisers to have knowledge of it.”* Nextstep interviewee

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) have not been involved in the development of the Apprenticeship vacancies system directly, though NAS works with the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils at a strategic level. The SSC leads interviewed had found out about the system via the networks they are involved in relating to Apprenticeships, or through contacts in the LSC. But they had not had any specific briefings, or received any training from NAS. Several SSCs stated that they would like to have more information on how the system operates to be able to be able to direct enquiries from their sector and promote the system more fully. A few also felt that they would like to be more closely involved in the design and development of the system, for instance by gathering information from employers and providers in their sector to input into functional elements, such as industry classifications and key words for searches:

*“What we haven't had is [the NAS saying to the] to the SSC, ‘We're going to get you involved. This is what you can help [with], and this is what we can do to support you and this is what you can do to support yourselves’.”* SSC interviewee

## Alternative routes for engaging with Apprenticeships

Alternative routes for finding out and applying for Apprenticeships, which existed prior to the creation of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and which are still being used, were investigated as part of the research. This provides an understanding of the resources that were previously available to those searching and applying for Apprenticeships, providing a benchmark against which the introduction of the Apprenticeship vacancies system can be compared. Typically, these are not singularly focused on Apprenticeships, but encapsulate broader employment or training opportunities. In other cases, alternative routes to engagement complement or build upon the Apprenticeship vacancies system at a local level.

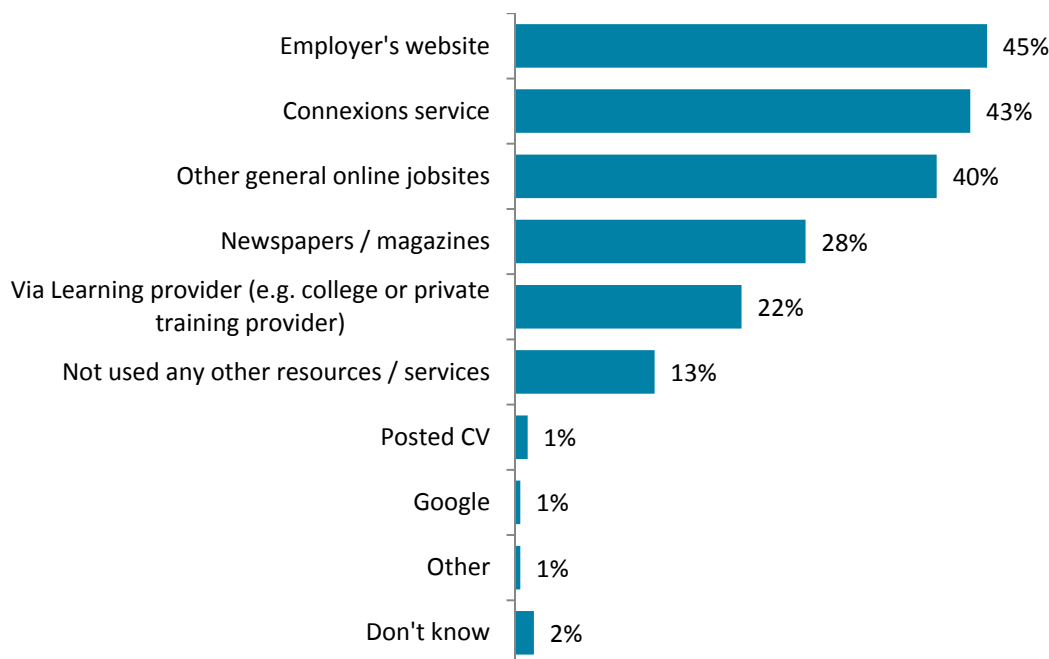
For example, several job listing websites offer some similar features and facilities to the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Websites such as ‘Monster’ and ‘TotalJobs’ produce Apprenticeship opportunities during a generic search, and often employers link adverts such as these to their own internal recruitment web pages. However, the Apprenticeship vacancies system is currently the only central database for Apprenticeship opportunities nationwide. It also has a unique function as a source of MI to Government for performance, planning and quality monitoring.

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<sup>5</sup> Including the Apprenticeship entitlement for 16-19 year olds by 2013 and target to see one in five 16-18 year olds in an Apprenticeship by 2020.

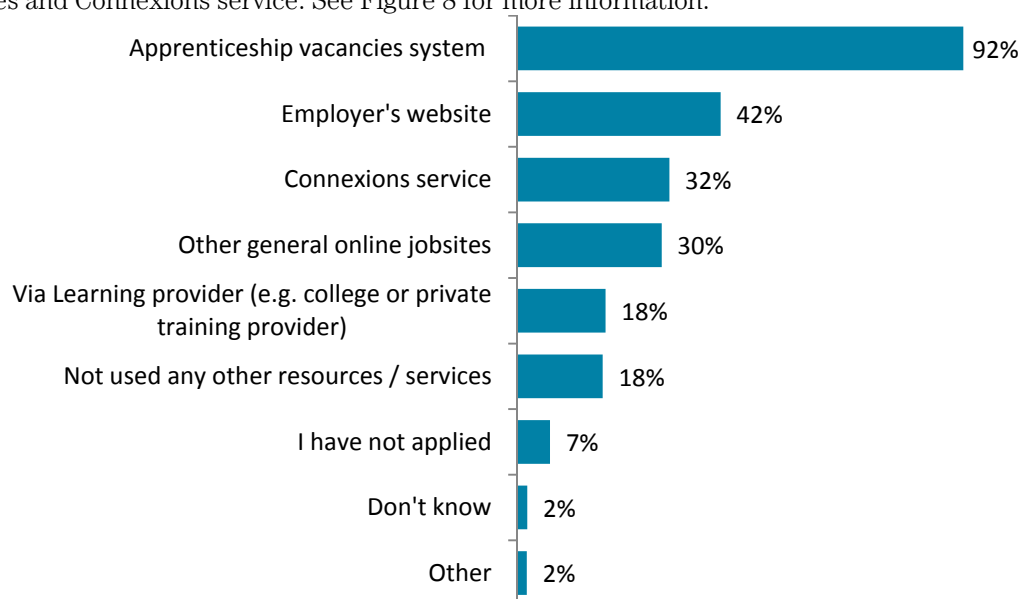
## Alternative engagement routes used by learners

The results of the learner online survey indicate that the learners also use alternative routes to find Apprenticeship vacancies, such as employers' own websites, the Connexions service and other general online jobsites. Interestingly, respondents' fourth most popular way to find Apprenticeship vacancies was through the print media (newspapers or magazines). This was a more popular method than finding out via a learning provider. 13 percent of learners only used the Apprenticeship vacancies system to find Apprenticeships. See Figure 7.



**Figure 7: Which of the following other resources or services have you used to find Apprenticeship vacancies?** Source: Learner Online Survey (Multiple response question, base= 824)

When applying for Apprenticeships, learners responding to the survey predominantly used the Apprenticeship vacancies system, with 18 percent only using the Apprenticeship vacancies system and no other resources. Others also apply via employers' websites, other general online job sites and Connexions service. See Figure 8 for more information.



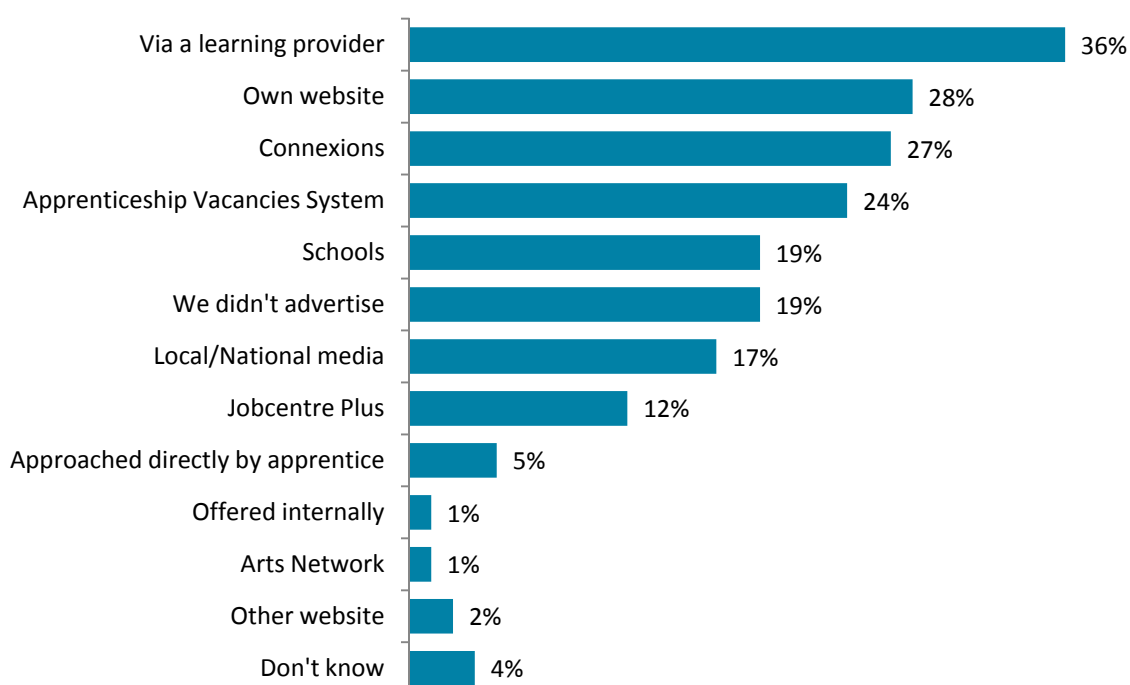
**Figure 8: Which of these other resources or services have you used to apply for Apprenticeship vacancies?** Source: Learner Online Survey (Multiple response question, base= 824)

## Alternative engagement routes used by employers and providers

Employers and providers also continue to use a variety of means for advertising Apprenticeship places, as well as using the Apprenticeship vacancies system. In the interim findings, employers surveyed indicated that the most popular approach was through their own websites. However, in this most recent survey, the most popular approach was via a learning provider. This may indicate the growing full service provision that providers are offering to employers, whereby the provider advertises and manages the vacancy on the employer's behalf.

The latest findings show that advertising through their own employer websites was still a popular approach, coming second. The third most popular approach to advertise and recruit apprentices was via Connexions. The fourth most popular option was through the Apprenticeship vacancies system.<sup>6</sup> See Figure 9 following.

Providers continue to carry out substantial engagement activity outside of 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.



**Figure 9: What routes did you use for advertising and recruiting apprentices? (Multiple Choice) Source: Employer Online Survey (Multiple response question, base= 120)**

## Alternative engagement routes via other stakeholders

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 external sites now direct the user towards the Apprenticeship vacancies system, although some of the websites we examined provided separate Apprenticeship search tools. In particular, Connexions still operate an online vacancies resource in some regions, on a local basis, as well as signposting learners to the Apprenticeship

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<sup>6</sup> N.b. Use of Apprenticeship vacancies may be understated, as its use can't be excluded from other approaches such as via learning providers, employers' own website and Connexions which may also use Apprenticeship vacancies as a tool.

vacancies system. Our depth interviews with Connexions indicate that these additional resources are frequently used to supplement the Apprenticeship vacancies system:

*“We’re saying to young people at the moment that if they’re looking for an Apprenticeship, that there are different places to look. The Apprenticeship vacancies system is not the only place to find Apprenticeships...its one of the main ways but it’s not the only way.”* Connexions interviewee

*“We take off vacancies for our area, and actually put them on our Connexions system. We put the jobs on our website and it links to the Apprenticeships website.”* Source: Connexions interviewee

*“We need not just a central system but one that can be added to and updated at a local level”* Connexions interviewee.

## Chapter 4 Summary

- > Take up by learners, in terms of registration and applications, is high and increasing over time. However take up by providers and employers is considerably lower and, whilst the number of vacancies on the system is increasing, this is still a long way short of meeting the demand for places from learners. The lack of availability of places is an off-putting factor for learners, as in many cases they are unable to find suitable opportunities, and where they do apply competition is fierce.
- > Electronic forms of communication are the most important means by which learners are made aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system; this includes via the Apprenticeship.org.uk website and via internet searches. Employer awareness of the system is low.
- > Other routes for finding and applying for Apprenticeships are still used by learners, though for many the Apprenticeship vacancies system is the primary tool used. In contrast, providers and employers see the Apprenticeship vacancies system as only one of several alternative ways for advertising and filling Apprenticeship vacancies.

## 5 | Use and usability

This chapter sets out how the Apprenticeship vacancies system is designed to work for various users, and how learners, providers, employers and others have found using it.

This takes into account the ongoing development of the technical aspects of the system, based on other consultations with users, such as the work undertaken by S-Cool. Because of this ongoing work, this report does not focus on the details of functionality issues, but covers how users have found using the system more broadly.

### Overview of the functions and how the system operates

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 system, 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.

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
> My Home	> My Home	> My Home
> Message Board	> Manage My Vacancies	> Search for Vacancies
> Manage Applications	> Vacancy Search	> My Profile
> My Saved Vacancies	> Candidate Search	> Change Password
> My Saved Searches	> Maintain my Profile	> Logout
> My Alerts	> Reports	> Delete Account
> Search for Vacancies	> FAQs	
> Search for Learning Provider	> Sign Out	
> My Profile		
> Application Form		
> Change Password		
> Help		
> FAQs		
> Logout		
> Delete Account		

Table 2: Main functions available to users

Employers have a number of options regarding how they use the system:

- > Firstly, they can arrange for a learning provider to manage their vacancies on the system entirely on their behalf, including helping draft the advert, uploading it onto the system, and managing the applications as they come in. In this case the employer does not have any direct contact with the Apprenticeship vacancies system itself as this is done entirely by the provider.
- > Secondly, employers can choose to place an advert on the system that then links to their own website or jobs page, redirecting learners into their own HR system. In this case providers also do the initial uploading of the advert, and employers simply continue to manage the applications that then come in via their own systems. Providers follow up with employers to ascertain which candidates were successful (and whether they were initially routed through the Apprenticeship vacancies system) in order to complete the vacancy on the system.
- > Finally, for larger employers who provide their own training, it is possible for them to have their own account in the same way a learning provider would. In this case the employer manages the system entirely on their own behalf.

Providers therefore in most cases have the main responsibility for managing the system. Providers have an account on the system which includes a profile, which can be tailored for employers and learners. Once an employer chooses to work with them, providers submit a request to NAS to be linked to that employer. They can then complete the vacancy advert on their behalf, and potentially receive the applications coming in via the system. Once the selection process has taken place, providers inform candidates of the outcome by moving them to either 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' categories (an additional category is now shown for applications that are 'withdrawn' by the learner) and complete the vacancy on the system.

Learners can therefore search for vacancies advertised on the system, and apply using an application form in a common format, which can be saved on the system. The system also saves their profile, including key information on contact details and educational achievements. Once an application is submitted, learners are updated on its progress in their 'manage applications' section; this lists which applications are pending, successful or unsuccessful. Learners are able to apply for a maximum of ten vacancies at one time, and can submit more applications as they are notified of outcomes. Learners may be asked to take part in further selection processes, such as selection days with a provider or an interview with the employer, before they are informed of the final outcome.

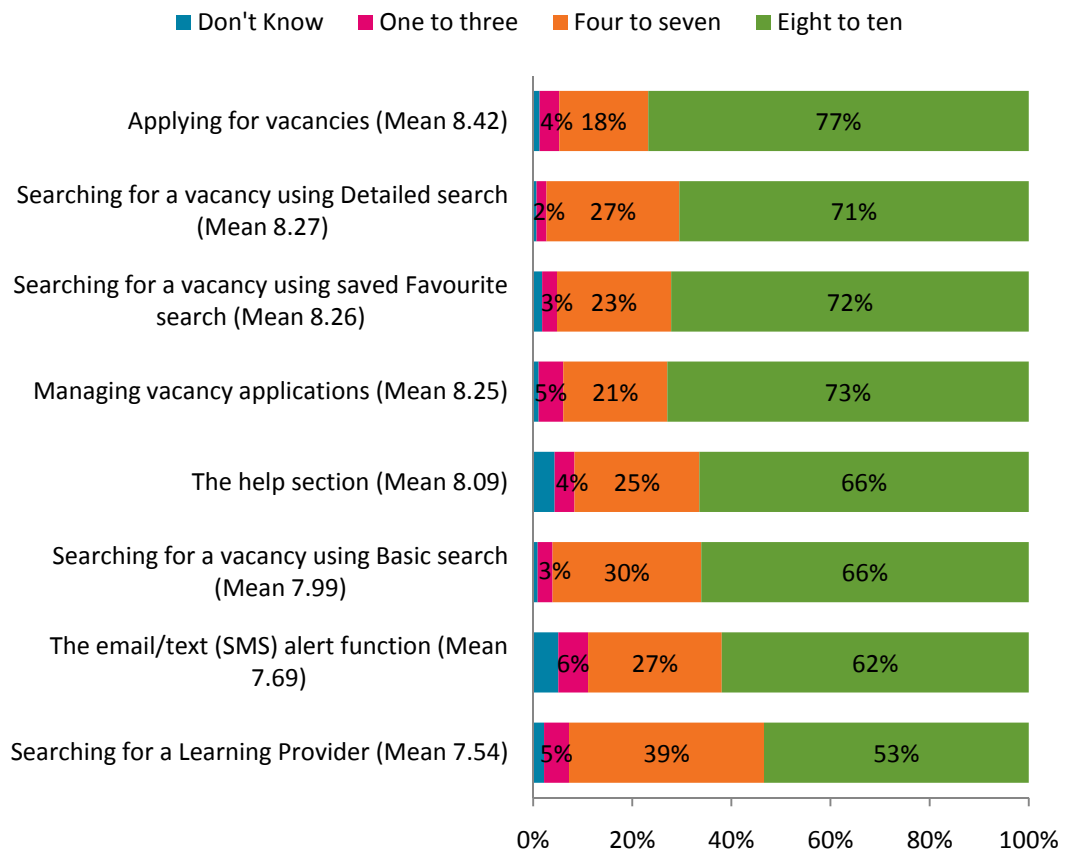
## Learners

Most of the respondents to the survey use the system regularly. The interim survey findings identified that 59 percent had used the system more than five times. This increased to 80 percent in the final survey findings. What is more, only 6.5 percent stated that they only used the Apprenticeship vacancies system once in the interim survey, and in the final survey this dropped to just 2 percent. Clearly, a significant majority of those registered users that took part in the two surveys for the evaluation are actively using the system.

The functions used by the most learners include the Basic and Detailed searches, where learners can search vacancies by key words and other categories, followed by completing an application form and managing applications. The functions that are least used are the Help section, searching for a learning provider and setting up SMS alerts when new vacancies are added that match criteria saved in the 'favourite search' function. Support in using these functions is now available through the learner e-learning tools.

Learners were asked to rate eight areas of functionality of the system for their respective usefulness. All scored highly, with a score of 10 representing 'very useful', whereas a score of 1 represents 'not at all useful'. Bearing these high individual scores in mind, the most useful top three functions on the system, according to the learners, are (in descending order): applying for a vacancy (8.42), searching for a vacancy using detailed search (8.27) and, thirdly,

searching for a vacancy using saved favourite search (8.26). The least useful functions are (in descending order): searching for a vacancy using basic search (7.99), the email/text (SMS) alert function (7.69) and, least useful of all, searching for a learning provider (7.54). See Figure 10.



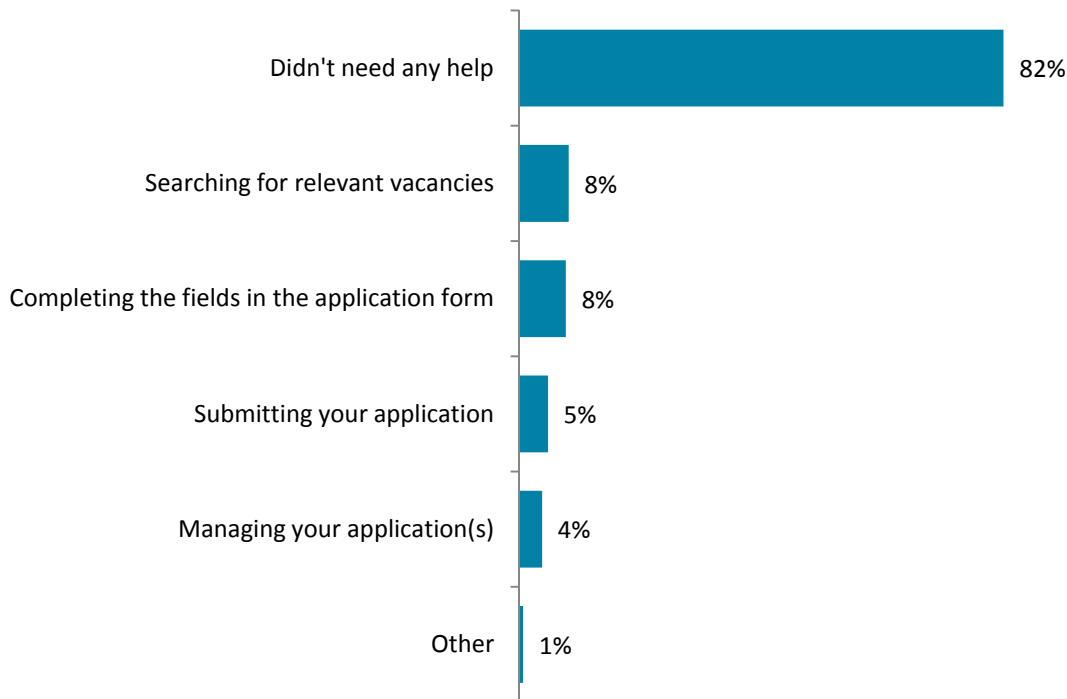
**Figure 10: How useful do you find each of the functions on the website? Source, Learners Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, variable base)**

Learners also rate fairly positively the information available on the system, the design of the system and finding their way around, giving a mean score for each of these elements of just over 7 out of 10, where one is ‘very poor’ and ten is ‘very good’.

### How easy learners found using the system

Qualitative interviews with learners largely showed that learners found the system easy to use and didn’t require any additional help with most tasks. A number of learners interviewed said that the system was “very easy to use”, “straightforward” and that they “didn’t need any help to use it”. This is supported by the learner survey findings; when asked, ‘Do you think that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is easy to use?’, three quarters (74.2 percent) answered ‘yes’. However, in the previous interim survey this stood ten percentage points higher at 85 percent.

Learners were asked, since using the Apprenticeship vacancies system, whether they required any further help in completing searching for a vacancy, completing the fields in an application form, submitting the application and managing it. By far and away the most popular answer selected here was ‘Didn’t need any help’. This indicates how straightforward the process is.



**Figure 11: Did you need any further help on the following processes? Source: Learner Online Survey (Base= 824)**

Looking at specific processes on the system, learners appear to be fairly happy with the various elements. Learners rated the registration process at a mean of 7.76 out of 10, where 10 is 'very good'. When those who had applied for at least one vacancy using the Apprenticeship vacancies system (748 respondents) were asked to rate the process out of 10, the average (mean) rating was 8.21 in the latest survey, compared to 8.03 in the interim survey findings. A score of 10 signifies that the process was 'very easy'. Therefore, on this suggests that learners found it relatively straightforward to apply for vacancies using the system.

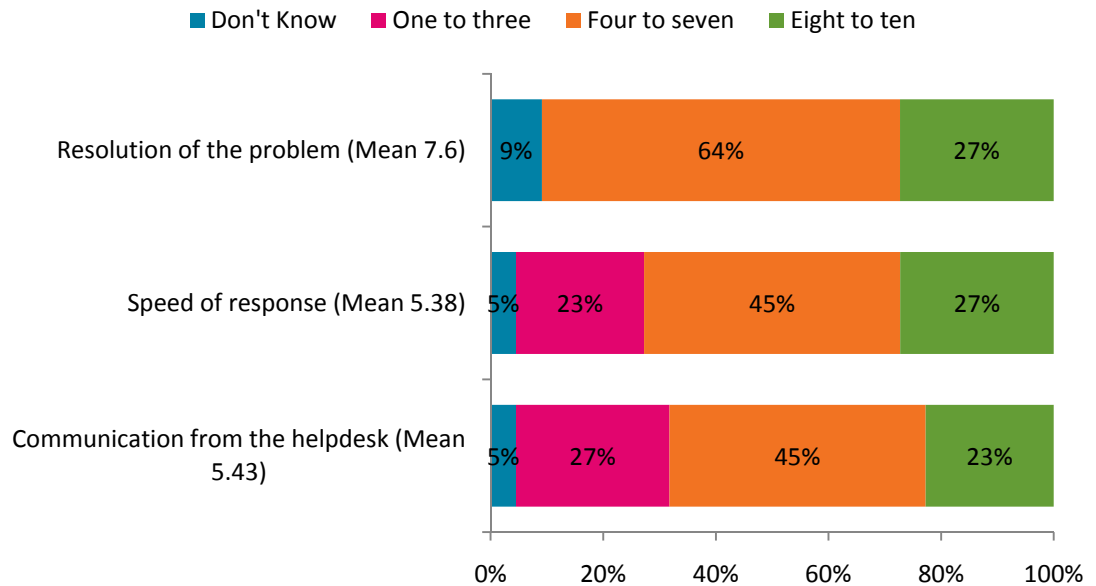
### Functionality and problems encountered

Respondents were also asked, 'Have you ever had a problem with the website, or experienced any issues with the system that have made it difficult to use?'. Just under a quarter (23 percent) said that they had had a problem. For those that did have a problem, the most popular response referred to problems with logging into the system. This was also the most often mentioned in the interim findings survey. Not receiving any response to queries/applications came next (which is an issue relating to provider responsiveness rather than system functionality), followed by problems with applying for a vacancy.

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. Problems have arisen when learners try to re-enter the system, as it will not accept the same email address with a new username or password. Previously the only way round was to re-register with a different email address, but this has now been resolved in the latest release of the system and learners are now able to reset their password using the same email account.

The 23 percent (194 learners) that did have a problem with the system were asked if they had contacted someone about this. Only 19 percent of the 194 did this. Of these, the majority (22/37) contacted the Apprenticeship vacancies Helpdesk.

Those that did use the Helpdesk gave neutral responses on service issues such as communication from the helpdesk (5.43) and the speed of response (5.38). A maximum score of 10 meant that the respondent was 'very satisfied'. In regards to the resolution of the problem, the average score was much higher, at 7.60. Nevertheless, the bases to these questions are very low and the answers to service issues relating to the Helpdesk should be considered in that context. See Figure 12.



**Figure 12: How satisfied are you with the following aspects of the service you received from the help desk? Source: Learner online survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 22)**

### Use by learners from minority ethnic groups

The Apprenticeship vacancies January 2010 Report shows that candidates from a White ethnic background account for 80 percent of the system's users who submitted an application for an Apprenticeship. They are followed by Asian and Asian-British candidates who are just below one-tenth (8 percent) of all applicants, Black and Black-British (6 percent) and Mixed (4 percent).

The distribution of ethnicities among applicants proclaims a strong ethnic diversity -especially if we consider that, according to the 2001 census, 92 percent of the population in the UK come from a White ethnic background, four percent are Asian or Asian-British, two percent are Black or Black-British and one percent is from a Mixed ethnic background.

### Use by disabled users

#### Disability and Apprenticeships

In 2009, the LSC commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to investigate and report on Apprenticeships and under-representation. *'Research to Shape Critical Mass Pilot to Address Under-Representation in Apprenticeships'* (IES, 2009) mapped representation in Apprenticeships and established equality criteria through a literature review, expert interviews and secondary data analysis. Key findings and recommendations were reported to develop pilot schemes with a view to tackle inequalities in gender and the representation of ethnic minorities and people with disabilities across all Apprenticeship sectors.

The IES reported that under 6 percent of apprentices declared they had a disability of some kind. A further 5 percent disclosed a learning difficulty (IES, 2009: 39). Together, these groups constituted approximately 10 percent of apprentices. Whilst this level of participation is broadly representative of national disability levels, this representation is not consistent across sectors. For instance, apprentices with disabilities are under-represented in the following sectors: electro-technical, plumbing, active leisure and learning, vehicle maintenance and repair, and hospitality and catering (IES, 2009: 39). Moreover, the number of apprentices disclosing a disability drops to 5 percent for Advanced Apprenticeships. In their analysis, the authors assert that a person with a disability is less likely than a non-disabled person to undertake an Apprenticeship programme and even less likely to pursue the Advanced Apprenticeship programme.

### Use of the Apprenticeship vacancies system by disabled learners

According to the Apprenticeship vacancies January 2010 Report, out of a total of 41,630 candidates who submitted an application through the Apprenticeship vacancies system between March 2009 and January 2010, one percent self declared<sup>7</sup> being disabled. In the same period, disabled users of the system submitted 1,130 applications; one percent of the total number of applications submitted. The proportion of disabled learners submitting an application via the Apprenticeship vacancies system is therefore lower than the overall proportion of current apprentices who report a disability, as reported in the IES report above, and is also below national disability levels.

In our survey, disabled users of the system account for eight percent of the sample, providing enough disabled users in the sample to perform valid statistical tests to compare the group's experience and performance to that of non-disabled users. Disabled learners, as with non-disabled learners, were asked to rate certain aspects of the Apprenticeship vacancies system by giving a score between 1 and 10 for each aspect, where 10 is 'very useful' and 1 is 'not at all useful'. In regard to rating areas of the system's functionality, these were all scored positively. Overall, this mirrored the views of learners who did not have a disability.

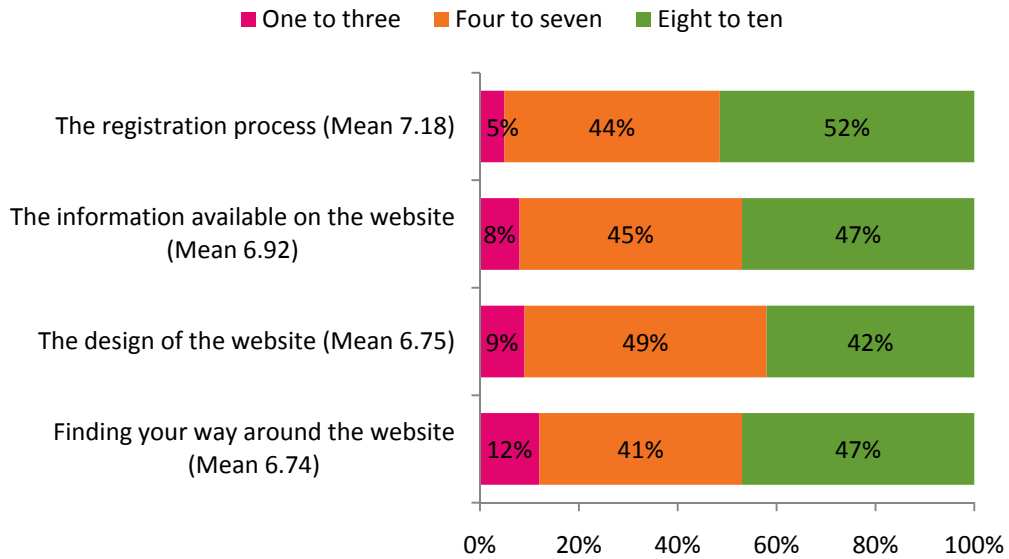
As with those learners without a disability, applying for a vacancy (8.00) was the most highly rated function. Searching for a detailed vacancy was the second most popular function with a mean score of 7.91. The third most popular function was searching for a vacancy using basic search (7.76). The least popular function was searching for a learning provider. Despite being the least popular, it should be noted that this still received a positive mean score of 7.66.

As with their non-disabled peers, disabled learners also were asked to assess other usability aspects of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Again, they gave a score between 1 and 10, with a score of 1 signifying 'very bad' and 10 signifying 'very good'. In regards to the information available on the system, disabled learners gave an average score of 6.92. The design of the system (its look and feel) received a score of 6.75. Navigating around the system and the registration process also received positive score of 6.74 and 7.18 respectively (see Figure 13 overleaf). These scores all indicate that disabled learners had positive views to the Apprenticeship vacancies system. However, their average scores were lower than those given by non-disabled learners.

Disabled respondents also gave a similar response when asked, 'Have you ever had a problem with the website, or experienced any issues with the system that have made it difficult to use?' Compared to non-disabled respondents (23 percent), 29 percent of disabled learners stated that they had had a problem. In one of our stakeholder interviews it was questioned whether it was possible to increase the size of the font on the system to assist partially sighted users. This is something which has been addressed in Release 4 of the system.

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<sup>7</sup> Self-declaration of disability may mean that actual number of disabled users could be higher, due to for example, learners not perceiving themselves as disabled or being reluctant to submit this information at this point.



**Figure 13: How do you rate the following aspects of the Apprenticeship vacancies system? (Disabled Learners)** Source: Learner Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 66)

When asked, ‘Overall, how would you rate the Apprenticeship vacancies system?’, disabled learners gave a mean score of 7.36 compared to a non-disabled score of 8.11. Again, although disabled respondents rated the system lower than their non-disabled peers, this is still a positive score.

## Providers

### Functions used by providers and usefulness

As outlined above, providers generally have the most responsibility for managing the system on a day to day basis and are involved in more of the functional elements of running the system than employers or learners. This is reflected in the fact that providers have required training in using the system, and significant resources have been invested in this.

Feedback from providers suggests that in principle the system is fairly straightforward and easy to find your way around. Providers have, however, encountered a number of glitches and usability issues that have made using the system less easy in practice. Generally providers have expressed acceptance that this is likely to happen with the introduction of a new system, and a number of the specific problems mentioned have been ironed out in later releases of the system, based on their feedback. Providers have raised a number of issues relating to the functionality of the system; it is positive to note that a number of improvements have been made to the system to address these issues. The issues raised by providers, and changes that have been made for the latest release of the system (Release 4), are set out in Table 3 overleaf.

Providers have reported that the system can be time-consuming to manage and keep updated. For example, up till recently each application had to be assessed and the set up of the system required that each candidate had to be moved individually within the ‘application ladder’. In some cases, providers have reported that they might have as many as 100 applications, and once the successful candidate has been selected, the other 99 all have to be declined for the same reason, each of which has to be done individually. This, and other functionality issues (outlined in Table 3), have made using the system more time consuming and less easy experience for providers, but have been resolved in recent releases of the system. Although now addressed, these historic issues will still be uppermost in providers’ perceptions of the system, and therefore clear information sharing regarding updates to the system’s functionality is required.

Functionality issue	Change to system
> Poor functionality for long description text in learning provider profiles and vacancy descriptions e.g. text richness, formatting	> Advanced text editor added for providers/employer, for creating rich content on vacancies e.g. insert bullet points, embolden and italicise text within specific vacancy fields to provide a better visual experience
> Lengthy and repetitive process to update candidates' progress on Vacancy Manager Ladder	> Improvements to the vacancy ladder will allow efficient management of larger number of applications
> Out of date provider and employer site details in system; possibility of advertising vacancy with an employer no longer trading and/or not suitable to offer training	> Out of date employer and learning provider site details removed
> Removing details of a candidate is time consuming/costly	> Removing inactive candidates from system made easier
> Potential data protection issues and opportunity costs in learning providers printing/faxing candidates' application forms to employers	> Candidates' application forms now able to be extracted and sent to employer via email, in an anonymised PDF (for data protection)
> Complications with sharing information on unsuccessful candidates to partners (e.g. Connexions) for referral and support	> The tools and procedures for supporting unsuccessful candidates have been changed and now provide an easier way to share information with other agencies
> Removing candidate registration details, at their own request, is time consuming/costly	> Candidates now able to delete their own accounts
> Candidate contact information not always available	> Candidate phone number now mandatory so that learning providers can contact them regarding further information and job interviews
> System not suitable to visually impaired learners	> Printable elements of the system have been made more legible to visually impaired users
> System not fully AA (Affirmative Action) compliant	> System made AA compliant
> Higher level Apprenticeships not easily identified	> Higher level Apprenticeships made easier to identify

**Table 3: Latest upgrades to functionality (Release 4)**

The functionality that providers find most useful is having all the candidates' details stored in one place, which can then be accessed online at any time. This provides a level of coordination of applications, adds structure to the process, and ensures that all information is safely stored and can't be lost. Providers who have successfully used the system find that the processes for posting vacancies, managing applications and following up with candidates are fairly straightforward and easy.

In nearly all of the focus groups providers raised the issue regarding the information collected on the application form, with the majority finding that this is not enough to enable sorting and contacting learners. This ranges from logistical information such as phone number (which will now be a mandatory field for learners following Release 4), date of birth, and contact details for referees. In addition, providers felt that the application form doesn't allow for collection of enough information to assess the suitability of the learner, and often providers have to request a CV from learners or ask them to complete an additional form. This practice is common, as half of learners surveyed (who had submitted an application) had been asked to send a CV in addition to the application form on the system. Learners interviewed also felt that they would like to be able to include more of the information they have in their CV. This clearly causes additional administration and lengthens the process.

### Fit with providers' systems

The main issue raised by providers and the biggest barrier to more widespread use is the difficulty of integrating the Apprenticeship vacancies system with providers' own systems and processes. This is partly due to issues relating to functionality, and partly due to the fact the providers have existing systems already managing similar processes, which they are not willing to replace at this stage with the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

Practical difficulties in integrating the Apprenticeship vacancies system with existing systems or processes have arisen as a result of a number of functionality issues as outlined in Table 3. For example, the lack of capacity of the text editor on the system has meant that providers haven't been able to transfer the formatting (for making the text visually appealing and readable e.g. bullet points) used in existing materials into their profiles or vacancy adverts; and not being able to access an electronic version of candidate's application forms has made it difficult to integrate the information with providers' own tracking systems. Several of these issues have been addressed in Release 4, which should go some way in addressing functionality issues and make using it less time consuming.

However, a number of providers felt that the Apprenticeship vacancies system only related to a small area of their business, and that their existing systems are better equipped to handle their broader offer in an integrated manner. Providers are able to offer a variety of options, including pre-Apprenticeships, E2E, or other courses, depending on the needs of the learner and the availability of places at that time. In addition, for some providers the majority of their business comes from employers who already have an employee in mind to undertake an Apprenticeship, and therefore do not require an advertising and selection service. Therefore the Apprenticeship vacancies system only relates to a small area of their business; combining this with the functionality issues historically encountered means that many providers do not see the benefit of using the Apprenticeship vacancies system over their existing tried and tested systems.

### Employers

As mentioned above, there are a number of options for how employers can use the system. According to our survey data, just over a third of employers (35 percent) have opted for providers to manage the system entirely on their behalf; over a quarter (26 percent) have vacancies uploaded by the provider which then link to their own recruitment website; and just over one in ten (13 percent) manage it entirely themselves.<sup>8</sup>

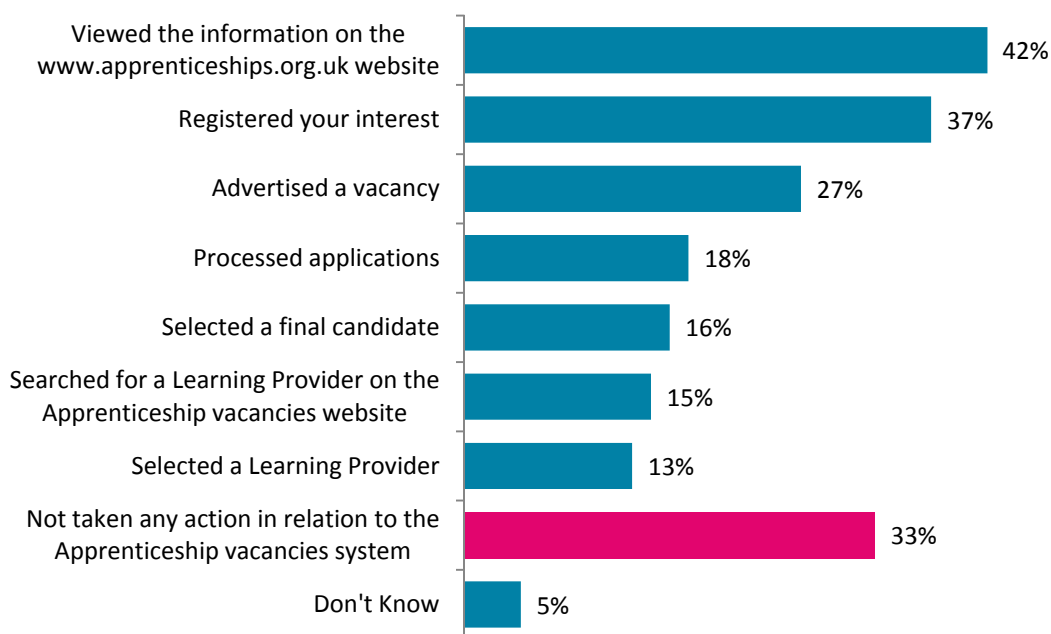
Therefore, most employers do not experience physically using the Apprenticeship vacancies system, but have a more broad experience of using the service that this provides for them and the processes in which they take part in order to do so.

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<sup>8</sup> However, this is based on very low bases, and data is not available on how this compares to overall usage information.

Figure 14 below indicates the proportion of employers (from those who are aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system) who have experienced the various stages and processes involved in using the system. The first step is to register their interest with NAS, which almost two-fifths of employers who were aware of the system had done. Over a quarter have advertised a vacancy, and less than a fifth have progressed to later stages including processing applications and selecting a final candidate.

Of the functions that are available on the system and/or Apprenticeships website for employers to use, 42 percent of employers had viewed information on the Apprenticeships website, but fewer have searched for a Learning Provider (15 percent) on the system (directed from the website). This indicates that very few employers are using the online resources that are directly available to them.

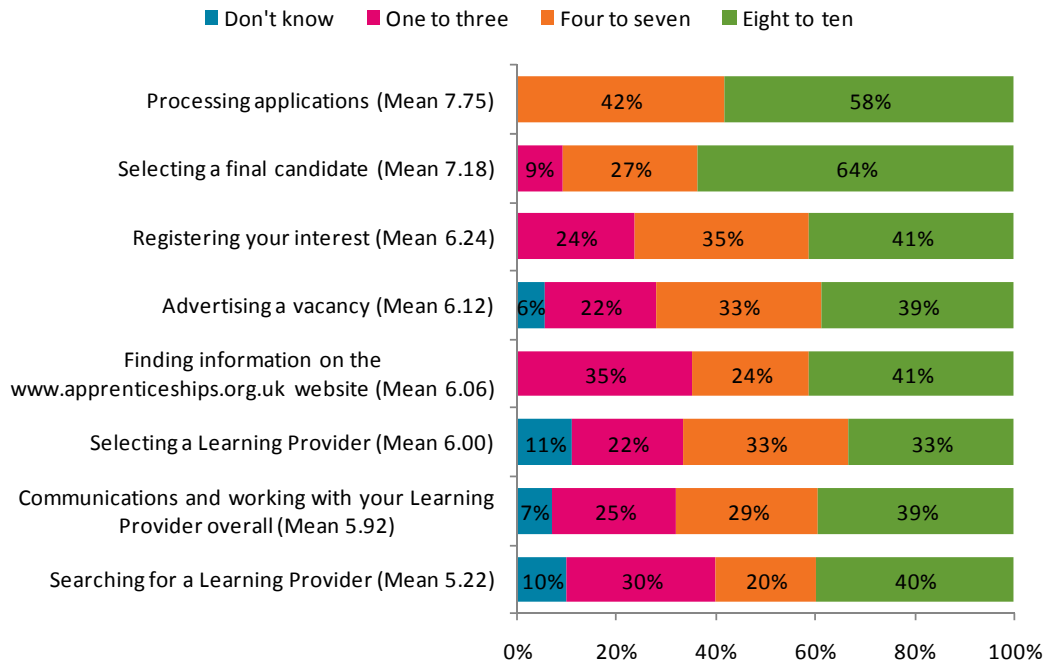


**Figure 14: Since you became aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, which of the following actions have you undertaken?** Source: Employer Online Survey (Multiple response question, base= 120)

### How easy employers find the Apprenticeship vacancies system

Employers were asked how easy they found a number of processes they experience as part of using the Apprenticeship vacancies system, which they were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is 'not at all easy' and 10 is 'very easy'. Employers were neutral or slightly positive about most of the processes; the easiest aspects were processing applications and selecting a final candidate which were rated at 7.75 and 7.18 out of 10 respectively. This may be because these processes are much the same for the employer as before the introduction of the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

The processes that employers found most difficult were 'searching for a Learning Provider' and 'communications and working with your Learning Provider overall', given a ratings of 5.22 and 5.92 out of 10 respectively. It should be noted that some of these mean ratings have fairly low bases, but this does give an indication of the experience of some employers. See Figure 15.



**Figure 15: How easy did you find the following aspects of the Apprenticeship vacancies system? Source: Employer Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10)**

When asked whether employers have encountered a problem with the Apprenticeship vacancies system, 40 percent said that they had. The most common types of problems experienced were problems registering their interest and placing the vacancy advert. To register their interest, employers can either submit an online enquiry form or call the national helpline; this initial information is captured by the NAS call centre<sup>9</sup> and requests for further information are directed to regional NAS Employer Service Managers (ESMs). Findings from the qualitative research with employers and others making enquiries on their behalf suggest that some have experienced delays once they have contacted the Helpline or submitted an online enquiry:

*“I tried to ring the employer line on a couple of occasions, and I haven’t been able to speak to someone- it’s been very busy, I’ve just left a message and its taken a couple of days for them to get back to me”* Nextstep employment engagement officer

This is not directly an issue with the system itself; however, as all employers who wish to use this system for the first time have to be directed through this referral mechanism (as there is no option on the Apprenticeships.org.uk website to sign up directly to using the system), this is something that needs to be addressed in the context of wider NAS operations.

Feedback from other employers also suggests that the information sharing process to enable providers to draw up the vacancy advert can be quite time-consuming, and in several cases required checking and re-working to get the right message from the employer’s perspective:

*“It is difficult for us, as an employer, to get across a lot of the information about our organisation and what we do”* Employer interviewee

*“It’s that little bit of lack of control over the questions of what we potentially want out of it... because the college organise all of that for us”* Employer interviewee

<sup>9</sup> There is an externally contracted national NAS call centre, which has a team of dedicated advisors answering and directing enquiries from the national helpline and online enquiry forms.

## Other stakeholders

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. The main use of the system for other stakeholders interviewed was in an advisory capacity to learners. For example Connexions, nextstep and schools staff use the system in one-to-one sessions, demonstrating how to use it and looking for suitable vacancies and in some cases offering support for applications.

The majority report that they find using the system is easy and that it has largely been straightforward. The issues that have been encountered are largely similar to learners' issues, such as not being able to log in (now resolved with Release 4). Some interviewees also found that working on a local level, there were in some cases not able to narrow down the search to their immediate area, with the search function returning vacancies which would not be accessible to learners within their locality.

### Chapter 5 Summary

- > Learners generally find the system easy to use and useful; exceptions are where learners have had difficulties logging in or have not received any responses to applications from providers. This is confirmed by other stakeholders working with learners, who agree that the system is easy to use and useful for providing a central place for information on Apprenticeships.
- > However providers and employers find the system less useful, and have more difficulties in using it. For providers, this is largely due to experience of functionality issues and difficulties integrating the system with their own processes. Employers were neutral about their experiences of the processes they engage with, which may be indicative of their lack of direct involvement with the system. Employers' distance from the Apprenticeship vacancies system means that they find that some of the processes are not responsive to their requirements.

## 6 | User satisfaction

This chapter looks satisfaction with the system from the perspectives of the three main user groups; i.e. learners, employers and providers, and also other stakeholders. This highlights the value of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, the advantages and disadvantages, and the key benefits for users.

The key question in identifying the value of the system is; what difference has the introduction of the Apprenticeship vacancies system made, in comparison to previous approaches for searching and applying for Apprenticeships? The findings are compared against the expected benefits as set out by NAS (see Table 1 in the Introduction).

### Learners

Our research has identified that of all the main stakeholders, learners find the most value from the Apprenticeship vacancies system. The majority report that it is a valuable and useful tool for finding out about and applying for Apprenticeships. Evidence from those working with learners who have experienced the difference that the system has made compared to resources available in the past, such as Connexions and schools staff, highlight that the main value is in having a central location for Apprenticeship vacancies to be advertised.

Learners rated the system overall fairly highly, giving a mean score of 8 out of 10 when asked 'Overall, how would you rate the Apprenticeship vacancies system, where 1 is 'very poor' and 10 is 'very good'?' Furthermore the most common rating given was the maximum of 10, with 32.5 percent of learners giving this rating (see Figure 16 for more information). This has seen a slight increase from the interim findings, where the mean rating given by learners was 7.8 out of 10. This suggests that learners' experience of the system has been more positive over time, as it has become more established.

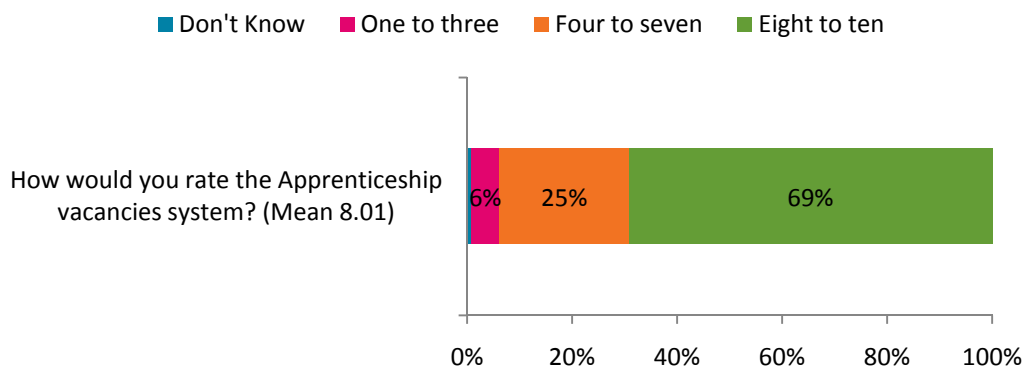
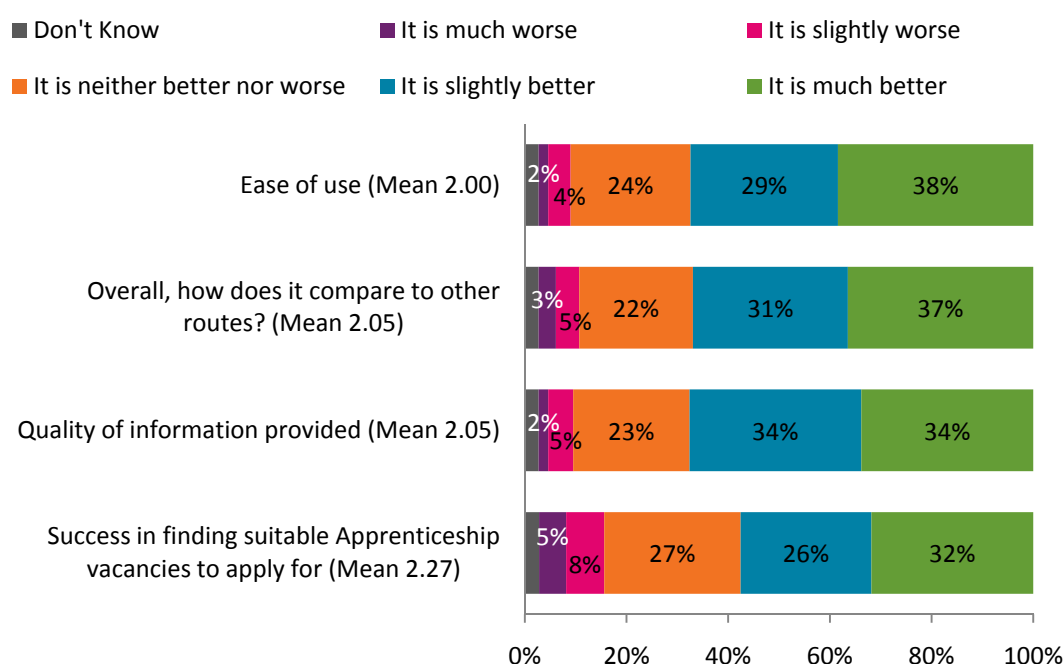


Figure 16: How would you rate the Apprenticeship vacancies system? Source: Learner Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 824)

## Comparison with previous or alternative routes for engaging with Apprenticeships

A number of alternative routes for finding and applying for Apprenticeships used by learners were identified in order to create a benchmark to compare the added value of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. The main alternative routes for finding Apprenticeship vacancies were: employers' own websites; the Connexions service; other general online job sites; in newspapers or magazines; and via the Learning Provider. Similarly, learners had also applied for vacancies via employers' websites, Connexions, other online job sites and via the Learning Provider.

Learners were asked how the Apprenticeship vacancies system compared to these alternative routes in a number of areas (see Figure 17). On average, the findings were positive with over two-thirds of learners stating that the Apprenticeship vacancies system was 'slightly better' (31 percent) or 'much better' (37 percent) than other resources used. In particular, learners valued the system in relation to the ease of use and the quality of information provided.



**Figure 17: How does the Apprenticeship vacancies system compare to other resources or services you have used for finding out and applying for Apprenticeships in the following areas? Source: Learner Online Survey (Base= 742, mean values calculated with 'it is much better'=1, and 'it is much worse'=5)**

This is supported by evidence from interviews with intermediaries who support learners in searching and applying for Apprenticeships, who have a longer-term perspective than learners of the previous resources and approaches that were available. A consensus across interviews with Connexions, nexstep and school careers advisors is that the added value of the Apprenticeship vacancies system is in bringing together the opportunities available specifically for Apprenticeships on a national scale. There is strong support for the 'one stop shop' approach, enabling learners to access information on Apprenticeships and apply for vacancies in one place. Making this available on a national scale allows learners to see all the opportunities available, both within their local area and elsewhere, thereby broadening their horizons.

Another advantage compared to past approaches is that the Apprenticeship vacancies system ensures that all the positions offered are linked to an employer, and are a genuine paid opportunity. Previously in some cases, learners would be expected to find employment before looking to start an Apprenticeship.

This therefore makes it much simpler for intermediaries to advise learners on where to look for Apprenticeships than in the past:

*“It’s a national site. If they want to look at opportunities throughout England, they’ve got it at their fingertips, which is really, really good.”* Connexions advisor

*“It was unbelievably complicated before, the way you had to find a job before you could get an Apprenticeship. I think potentially there’s huge advantages to the way [the Apprenticeship vacancies system] is operating”* Connexions advisor

*“It was what was needed – a database of paid opportunities and Apprenticeships that young people can access”* School careers officer

### Advantages and disadvantages

The most frequent advantage of the system mentioned by learners is that it is easy to use and navigate, with 27 percent of learners giving this answer to an unprompted question. In qualitative discussions learners frequently commented that the system was ‘straightforward’, ‘easy to use’ and that the online format was easily accessible.

Other common advantages identified by learners are: that the system lists all the information about the vacancy/Apprenticeship; that it is quick to use; that it offers a wide range of Apprenticeships; the ability to apply search criteria to narrow search; that all the vacancies are in one place; and that it is solely for Apprenticeships. Furthermore, the survey highlights that learners rate fairly highly the information available on the Apprenticeship vacancies system, including information on the training (e.g. qualifications), the job role and the pay and conditions for the Apprenticeship (see Figure 18), suggesting that value it a useful source for gathering required information on Apprenticeship opportunities.

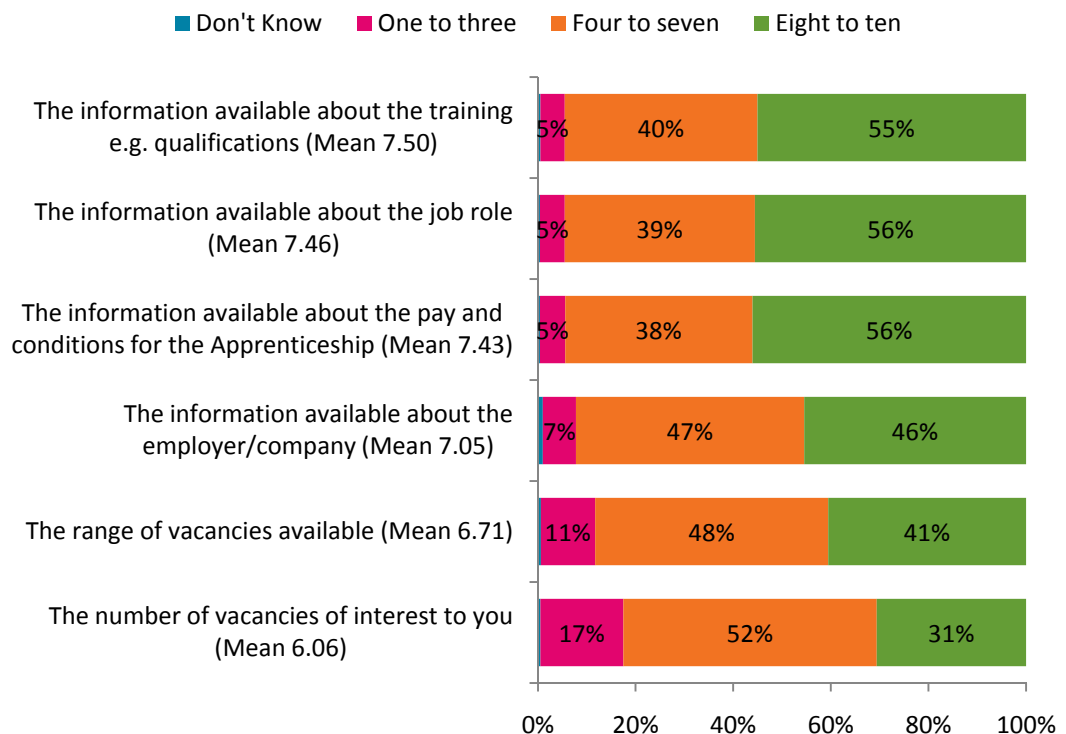


Figure 18: How do you rate the following aspects of the vacancies on the website? Source: Learner Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 824)

Interestingly, the least popular reason given for not applying for an Apprenticeship was that 'there were no vacancies at a suitable wage level'. Only one respondent selected this. Therefore, pay does not appear to be a factor in preventing learners from applying for an Apprenticeship. Furthermore, when all respondents, irrespective of whether or not they had applied for an Apprenticeship, were asked to rate six aspects of the vacancies on the system, 'the information available about the pay and conditions for the Apprenticeship' was rated the third most important aspect, with a mean of 7.43. A score of 10 signifies 'very good' and this implies that respondents do have sufficient knowledge of salary on which to base their decision. Again, when asked how important ten factors were when deciding which Apprenticeship vacancy to apply for, the 'weekly wage' was the eighth most important factor.

There are also, however, a number of disadvantages that learners identified that may reduce the value of the system to some users. Experiencing technical difficulties in using the system has made the experience less positive for some learners, or even put them off from using it further. 24 percent of learners surveyed have encountered a problem with the system. The most common technical issue raised is the user name and password, which has stringent format requirements which make it difficult to remember, and if forgotten it is very difficult to re-enter the system. A few learners interviewed stated that after encountering this problem and being unable to find a way round, they had not used the system again. Whilst this issue has been resolved in the latest release of the system, this highlights the impact of initial technical problems with the system's functionality.

A significant issue raised is a lack of response to queries or applications, identified by 40 percent of learners who reported a problem with the system. A lack or late response was the top reason given by learners who stated that the Apprenticeship vacancies system had made them less likely to apply for an Apprenticeship. Many learners interviewed reported that they didn't receive any response, such as an update on their 'applications ladder' or any direct communication from the provider. Several learners who were eventually successful in finding a place commented that they had given up hope for their application, having not heard anything following the closing date given on the system. This is an important issue relating to provider behaviour (rather than system functionality) that needs to be addressed as it is a key off-putting factor for learners using the system.

This is an issue raised by providers and others supporting learners, as the online format of the system means that learners are more at arm's length and do not receive the initial information, advice and guidance and personal contact that would be the case if the learner came directly to the provider or other advisory service such as Connexions. Where learners previously had personal contact with providers or Connexions staff, they could receive more guidance, for example with the type of courses they are applying for and where another course may be more suitable. However, the Apprenticeship vacancies system does have a referral process, whereby learners who are unsuccessful are flagged to local Connexions advisors to offer them help and support with further applications and general careers advice.

There is some concern from intermediaries such as Connexions that the online format may make Apprenticeships less accessible for harder to reach young people, particularly those without internet access at home and those who struggle with IT skills. For this reason, it is important that Connexions continue to play an active role in supporting disadvantaged young people, such as providing internet access at their centres and supporting learners through the registration and application process. To support this, NAS have recently launched a suite of e-learning tools for intermediaries supporting learners, to enable them to be fully aware of how the system operates, as well as e-learning tools directly to support learners in using the system.

Another important issue that learners report is the lack of vacancies in suitable job roles or locations (particularly rural areas). Of those who hadn't applied for a vacancy on the system, the top two reasons given were that there were no suitable opportunities in a job role they were interested in (stated by 62 percent) or that there were no suitable opportunities in a suitable location (stated by 43 percent). This is partly symptomatic of the wider economic context and lack of supply of Apprenticeship opportunities more broadly.

However, positioning the Apprenticeship vacancies system as a 'one-stop-shop' for Apprenticeships raises expectations that learners will be able to find an opportunity here; and in many case this expectation is not met. Managing expectations about the availability of Apprenticeships on the system is an important issue that needs to be addressed, as widespread dissatisfaction would be damaging not only to the system but to the Apprenticeships brand as a whole.

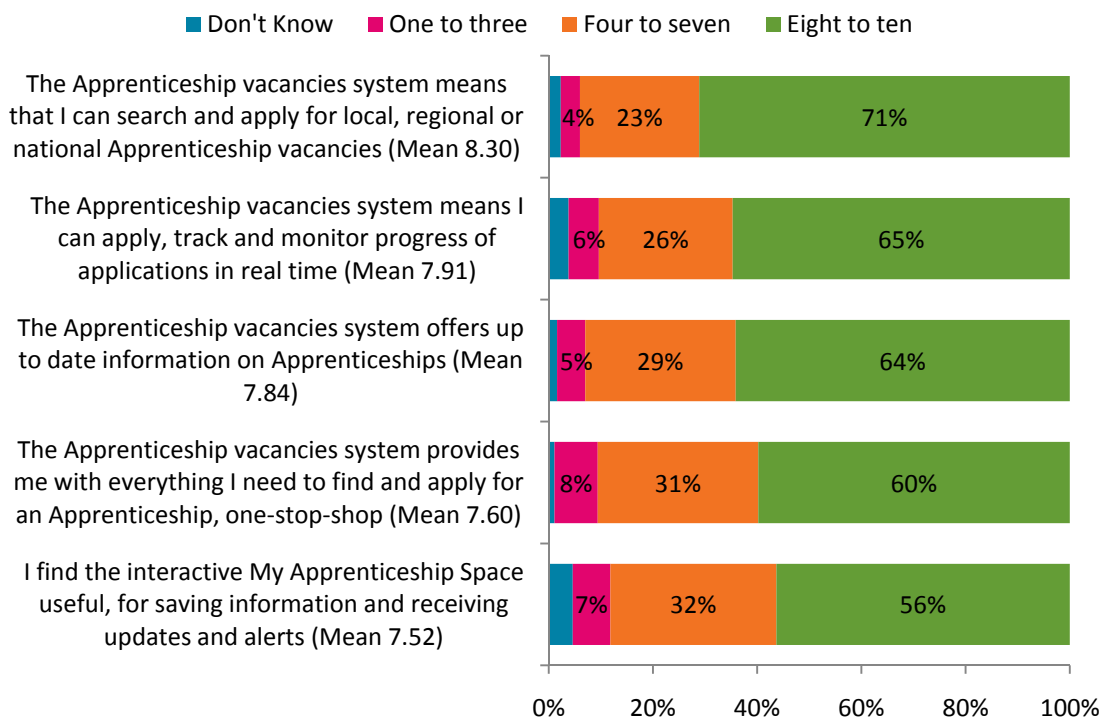
*“The concern from Personal Advisors are the young people who have registered this year and then basically there have been no vacancies... If the word starts to get round then it dissuades young people from registering or coming back in the system”* Connexions interviewee

A number of learners felt that there needed to be more information on the system, particularly in regards to: the job specification; the training and qualifications; the employer; future prospects; and a map of the location of the job.

### Key benefits

Learners surveyed on average fairly strongly agreed with the benefits of the system as set out by NAS. Figure 19 below shows that learners agreed most strongly that the Apprenticeship vacancies system means that they can search and apply for local, regional or national Apprenticeship vacancies, and that they can apply, track and monitor progress of applications in real time. This is a very positive indication that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has fulfilled the expected benefits set out for learners. Other benefits stated by learners in the survey included that it provides more information or increased knowledge about Apprenticeships, and that it provides access to more/wide range of Apprenticeships.

In the qualitative interviews, learners emphasised that the key benefits were that it is easy to use, and that it was a benefit being online as this means it is interactive, and can be accessed at any time, for example from home or a Connexions centre.



**Figure 19: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Apprenticeship vacancies system? Source, Learner Online Survey (Distribution of agreement on a scale between 1 and 10, base= 824)**

## Employers

The evidence suggests that the value of the service and satisfaction with the system is lower on the employer side, and that employers are less engaged and more ambivalent about the Apprenticeship vacancies system. It is worth noting that it is difficult to assess employers' views on the Apprenticeship vacancies system, because for the majority their contact with it is very remote. This appears to have impacted on the data collected; employers surveyed who had used the system gave a wide range of scores between 1 (very poor) and 10 (very good), giving a mean rating of 5.3. Although a significant number of employers rated the system at 7 or more, nearly a quarter of employers gave the lowest rating of 1 (see Figure 20).

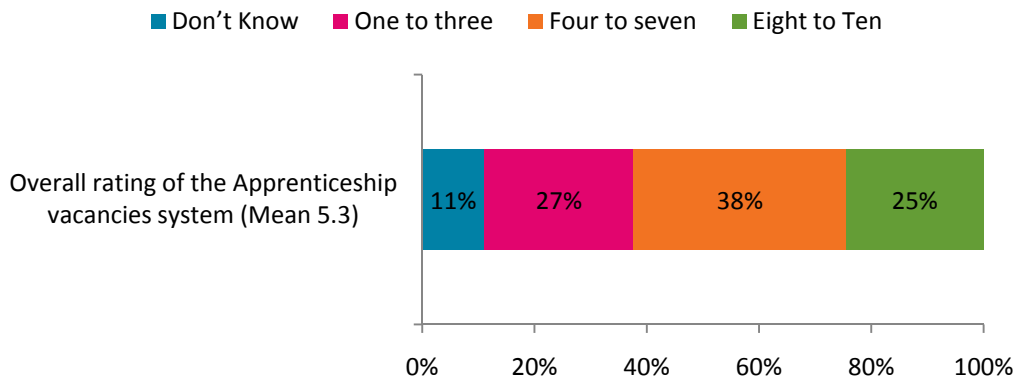


Figure 20: Overall, how would you rate the Apprenticeship vacancies system? Source: Employer Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 45)

A similar pattern emerges from employers' likelihood to recommend the system to another employer, with employers giving a mean likelihood score of 4.9 out of 10, where 1 is not at 'all likely' and 10 is 'very likely'. Again, there appears to be a range of experiences, with 22 percent of employers giving it the lowest rating of 0, but 16 percent giving it the highest rating of 10 (see Figure 21). This raises significant concerns about some employers' experience of engaging with the system, and that there are clearly some inconsistencies in experience that need to be addressed.

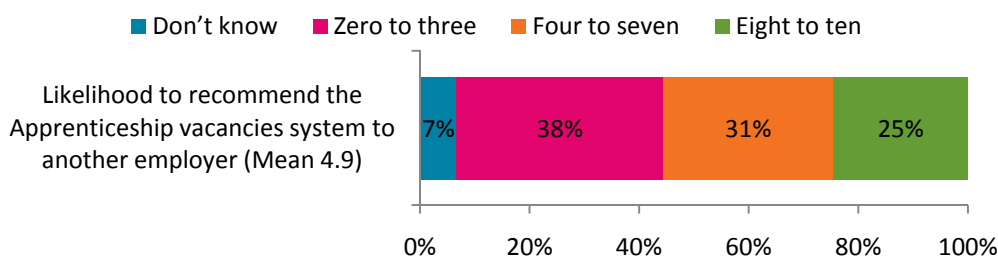


Figure 21: How likely would you be to recommend the Apprenticeship vacancies system to another employer? Source: Employer Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 45)

### Advantages and disadvantages

The key advantages of the Apprenticeship vacancies system compared to other routes for advertising Apprenticeships identified by employers in the survey are that it is low cost (with the resource itself being free, and only costs in terms of resources to input into the process), and gives access to candidates who are actively looking for an Apprenticeship. This is supported by the qualitative evidence, with some employers stating that it had saved them resources as the provider managed it on their behalf. Another employer stated:

*“I think the main advantage is that people who are applying for that post are definitely applying for an Apprenticeship... so that brings us people that understand what the Apprenticeship is”* Employer interviewee

Other advantages brought out in the qualitative interviews, particularly for larger employers, is that it signposts prospective candidates to their own website, where previously learners may not have thought to look at that particular employer’s website. Employers have been able to draw on a wide pool of candidates as a result:

*“It’s a good way of advertising that we’re looking for apprentices and it’s a good way of getting some young talent”* Employer interviewee

*“It’s a way to tap into our target group”* Employer interviewee

The current economic climate and low number of vacancies on the system has meant that employers (or providers) have received a large number of responses to adverts. This has the advantage that employers can pick the highest calibre candidates, and some employers report that they have found good candidates through the system. However the disadvantage is that the system enables applications from unsuitable candidates, for example from long distances (who are not looking to relocate) and those applying without serious intentions of following up. It is an advantage of the system that employers can in part rely on providers to manage initial applications and sift suitable candidates.

This highlights another advantage for some employers, in that the system is managed on their behalf by providers, thus saving some resources. However, the main disadvantages for employers seem to be as a result of being one step removed from the process, and resulting problems in communication and the length of time for the whole process. Employers have reported problems or delays with the time it takes to from expressing an interest to having a vacancy on the system. The processes required to get the employer to the point where they are ready to use the system (managed by NAS ESMs) need to be streamlined, but also the front end processes of using the system, including being matched to a provider have in some cases taken too long.

This is supported by the survey; in response to an open question as to how the Apprenticeship vacancies system could be improved, the most common answers were to make it more simple to use/faster (16 percent), to have ownership of vacancy instead of the provider (9 percent), and to improve communication/information (9 percent).

As explored earlier, some employers would prefer to be more involved in the forming the vacancy advert and application form to ensure that the right message is given out and suitable candidates are attracted and selected. Selective cases appear to indicate that not all employers are being made aware by providers of the opportunity to tailor ‘additional questions’ to ask candidates. Some employers would prefer to have direct access to the system to facilitate this:

*“We were given a sort of template that we had to fill in to actually describe the vacancy. What would be helpful would be to have more direct access, where we could have sight of the template and maybe some examples of other Apprenticeship vacancies filled in”* Employer interviewee

## Key benefits

In relation to the expected benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system for employers as set out by NAS, 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 7.2 on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) and 10 (strongly agree). Employers agreed less strongly and were fairly neutral regarding the other expected benefits set out for the Apprenticeship vacancies system (see Figure 22).

The statement with least support is that the Apprenticeship vacancies system offers flexibility of involvement, with a mean rating of 4.7 out of 10. This suggests that the current system does not offer sufficient flexibility for employers to use as they would wish. This may also support the above evidence that employers would like to be involved in more ways in the management or operation of the system.

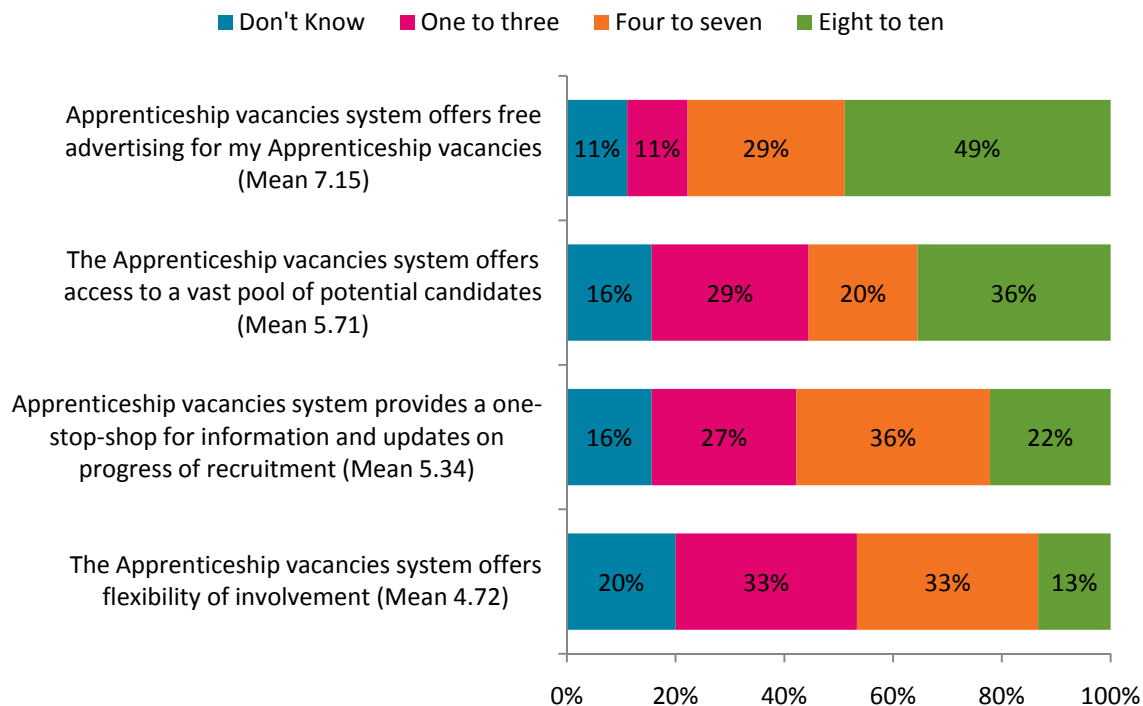


Figure 22: To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Apprenticeship vacancies system? Source: Employer Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 45)

## Providers

The introduction of the Apprenticeship vacancies system had mixed reception amongst providers. The concept was welcomed by some, and most providers felt that the Apprenticeship vacancies system suited their existing roles with employers, in that they already provided services and facilities for advertising vacancies, managing applications and conducting the initial filtering of learners on behalf of employers.

However, the majority of providers at the focus groups reported that there was a lack of buy-in within their organisations, as the system was seen as an additional requirement which didn't meet any of their particular needs. The majority of providers see the system as a tool for attracting learners to apply; however this is not a problem for providers as they don't struggle to attract learners. The need is for more interest from employers, and providers don't see the Apprenticeship vacancies system as a key tool for engaging employers.

Providers use the system to varying extents and it is reasonable to state that very few, if any, of those interviewed for the evaluation posted all their vacancies on the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Many providers felt that the system would create additional work on top of existing processes, where long-standing recruitment processes were already in place and working effectively. Reasons for not using the system fully included: functionality issues; not being able to integrate the system with their own processes or business model; the fear of having other providers 'poaching' clients from information in the vacancy; and the suitability of the system for particular sectors or job roles. However providers will be contractually obliged to advertise their vacancies on the system from the academic year for 2010/11.

Therefore satisfaction with the Apprenticeship vacancies system amongst providers is mainly negative; whilst some identify some benefits and advantages of using the system, the majority of providers have not bought in to the need for the system, and are unsatisfied with their experience of using it. This has impacted on their use of the system, with most providers only uploading a few vacancies onto the system.

Although providers report that the design of the system means that it is largely easy to use, many have encountered functionality problems, as outlined in Chapter 4, which have hindered their progress in using the system and considerably reduced satisfaction.

### Advantages and disadvantages

Although providers don't struggle with learner numbers, a few did comment that the Apprenticeship vacancies system enables them to reach a more diverse range of learners that they may not otherwise have had access to. The system is more widely accessible to learners who may be looking for an Apprenticeship but not know where to start; for instance by entering the term 'Apprenticeships' as search term in an internet search, they will be directed to the Apprenticeships website and vacancies system, and then to a provider if they are interested in one of their vacancies. This helps providers attract a variety of learners, for example in geographical areas where they have previously struggled to fill a position, or age groups outside of their usual customer base.

Following from this, the Apprenticeship vacancies system offers another avenue for providers to raise their profile and potentially attract more business. One provider stated that the system was *"very much welcomed because it's a free advertising platform for our business ... and that's of great commercial benefit to us"*.

Another advantage highlighted is that it is useful to have all the information stored in one place, and that the online format makes it easily accessible. This helps providers coordinate the applications coming in for a vacancy, and they can quickly check candidate's details. All of this information is stored on the system, helping with administration and ensuring that details are securely and centrally stored.

Providers also report that they have had a good response rate to adverts via the system, with a high number of candidates applying for each post. This allows plenty of choice in selecting the most suitable candidate for the role.

However this can increase the administrative burden for some, due to the high response rate and potentially from learners who are not realistically suitable (for instance, several examples were given of learners from unfeasible distances applying) or who are not genuinely interested in the position. Providers feel that this is more likely given the format of the system, with learners able to apply to a large number of vacancies without the guidance that they would have had previously, for instance if they went to a provider or Connexions office. Providers therefore have to spend more time assessing and responding to unsuitable applicants.

The issue of employer poaching by other providers is still a significant concern. It was argued that, as the system requires each provider to identify the employer they have been working with, there is an incentive for some, less scrupulous competitors to attempt to 'steal business'. Although the system allows for employers to be anonymised, feedback suggests that this is a difficult and time consuming process to go through on the system.

*'I know that you shouldn't have to legislate for illegal, underhand or surreptitious behaviour, but unfortunately it is happening. It's a real concern that commercial damage is being done by competitors who are behaving improperly ... who are using the information we put on [Apprenticeship vacancies system] as a commercial tool to poach our business.'* Provider focus group participant.

NAS has made it clear that using the system in this way is unacceptable and is supported in this by the Association of Learning Providers.

Some of those consulted felt that the basic format, or particular functions of the Apprenticeship vacancies system are not suitable for some sectors or employers. For instance, in the health and care sector some employers prefer their employees to be over 18; therefore providers often offer Programme-led Apprenticeships (PLAs) to 16-18 year olds, to train them so they are qualified, ready to move them into an employed position when they are ready. The Apprenticeship vacancies system does not fit with this model, as PLAs are not advertised on the system, and then providers work with existing learners rather than advertising externally.

Other sectors mentioned where respondents felt the Apprenticeship vacancies system would not have wide appeal to their employers include the creative sector, as this is a highly specialised and sub-divided sector which is not currently reflected in the search criteria and key words on the system; as a result searches for sector-specific key words either return no vacancies or irrelevant ones from other sectors. Representatives of the sector felt that employers would not want to advertise on the system, as they would be inundated with applications and would prefer to recruit locally.

Whilst it may be the case that not all may require this type of recruitment tool, where there are sector specific issues arising due to the functionality of the system, such as inadequate search criteria or industrial classifications, there is scope for NAS to work with SSCs further (either individually or via the Alliance of SSCs) to address these issues, drawing upon their expertise and feedback from their sector.

The main disadvantage reported by providers is that maintaining and managing the system requires extra time and resources, on top of their existing roles. It appears that few providers have been able to, or taken the steps to, successfully integrate it with their own process. This leads to duplication of activities and the perception that the Apprenticeship vacancies system adds another layer of bureaucracy. This includes increased time to collect and input information, which has to be collected from various sources (including quite detailed information from the employer) and can be quite time-consuming to upload; keeping the vacancy information up to date; managing a larger number of applications; and updating learners on the outcome via the system. A broad consensus is that the Apprenticeship vacancies system requires additional resources to manage.

### Key benefits

Based on these advantages and disadvantages there is limited support from providers in regards to the expected benefits of the system as set out by NAS. Feedback from providers suggests that there is some 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 see the system as being a 'professional and efficient' vacancy advertising and matching resource. The ability for providers to facilitate matching between employers and learners is hampered by the lack of information collected on the application form.

Furthermore, issues reported in Chapter 5 highlight that there has been some difficulty with exporting candidate application details and integrating with existing HR systems, thereby reducing the 'flexibility of involvement'. Finally, providers do not see the Apprenticeship vacancies system as meeting a business need, given that it has mainly acted as a tool for attracting more learners rather than remedying the shortage of employers. As a result, and due to limited use, the Apprenticeship vacancies system has not played a significant role in helping providers meet their targets.

## Other stakeholders

Satisfaction amongst other stakeholders who are working with learners to use the system, such as Connexions, nextstep and schools, is largely very high. The concept of having a national system specifically focused on Apprenticeships is widely welcomed as a step forward in promoting Apprenticeships and helping learners to find an opportunity. It was felt that the system increases the profile of Apprenticeships, alongside the national marketing campaigns, by increasing the visibility of the brand.

The consensus is that the advantage of this system over previous approaches for finding and applying for Apprenticeships is that it is all in one place, so that learners don't have to individually search for learning providers or employers and apply to each one, but that all of this should be on the system and learners can use a common application form. This also helps staff such as Connexions and nextstep, who are also searching for this information to update their own databases of opportunities, allowing them to access information on opportunities from across the region, not just locally.

Amongst the SSCs consulted, the majority felt that this was a useful tool for them to be able to promote to their employers. For example, Skillsmart Retail is currently setting up a National Skills Academy on a 'skills shop' model, where employers will come and be advised on skills solutions, and the Apprenticeship vacancies system will be a valuable tool to highlight to both employers and learners.

Similarly for Jobcentre Plus, the Apprenticeship vacancies system is seen as a useful tool for both the employers and those looking for employment that they work with, and the advantage for them will be that they can easily signpost clients to the system as a place to find out more about Apprenticeships.

However, several stakeholders interviewed mentioned issues with the lack of vacancies on the system relative to their area, and the potential of this issue to damage the perception of the Apprenticeship vacancies system.

*"There was a concern that it might jeopardise our own relationship with young people, because it was as if we were encouraging them to do something that at the end of the day they didn't get anything from"* Connexions interviewee

Another disadvantage for some is that they are not as involved in developing and inputting into the system as they would like, where they have valuable information to add and also require information back from the system. For example, several Connexions staff felt that they had build up a good range of local contacts and had more information on a local level than perhaps NAS staff did at this time. They would therefore like to be able to input this information into the system, to ensure that the database of opportunities is as complete as possible.

At the same time, Connexions staff are responsible for reporting on local employment information, such as the statistics on young people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET), and therefore would like feedback from NAS on information such as which candidates are successful in finding employment. Although progress on data sharing arrangements are underway in some regions, this partnership needs to be further developed to ensure the sharing of mutually beneficial information.

Other organisations, such as SSCs, would also like to be more involved in developing the system, such as providing sector specific information to help with segmentation and search categories within their industries. Some felt that they had not been involved to date, and that this has impacted on the usability of the Apprenticeship vacancies system for their sector.

## Chapter 6 Summary

- > User satisfaction amongst learners and those supporting them is high, with an overall mean rating of the system of 8 out of 10. There is general agreement that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has improved processes for finding out and applying for Apprenticeships compared to what was available previously. However important issues to address to maintain high satisfaction are to ensure there are enough vacancies for learners to apply for and that learners are kept updated on their progress, to avoid learners disengaging with the system and Apprenticeships in general.
- > Employer satisfaction is fairly neutral, reflecting their lack of direct engagement with the system. There appears to be a range of positive and negative experiences; where the system has worked well for employers, the key advantages are that it raises awareness of their opportunity and provides free advertising for their vacancy. Negative experiences arise from delays in the front-end engagement with the system and lack of interaction with the system to directly input into the recruitment process.
- > Providers are also not satisfied with the Apprenticeship vacancies system, due to usability issues and lack of business need for the system from their perspective. Although providers will be contractually required to use the system from August 2010, it is still important that their concerns are addressed as providers are key partners in making the system operational.

## 7 | Perceptions and practice

This chapter gives more detail on how users perceive the Apprenticeship vacancies system, and therefore how this impacts on how stakeholders are using it in practice in their specific context.

The aim is to compare this with the expectations set out by NAS on the purpose of the system and how they intended it to be used. This identifies how the original vision for the system has translated into perceptions and practice, highlighting how the system has been used and adapted on a practical level.

The section concludes with a summary of cases of good practice, including promotion, partnership working and provider practice. This also includes a review of good practice relating to e-recruitment for disabled learners, identifying a number of ways in which the Apprenticeship vacancies system can be developed or used to best support use by disabled learners.

### Learners

#### Perceptions of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

The system is perceived positively by the majority of learners, who see it as a useful resource for finding out and applying for Apprenticeships. Most learners find it easy to use and like having all the information in one place, and online. Learners surveyed have a fairly positive perception of the system itself, giving the design of the system a mean rating of 7.4 and finding the way around the system a mean rating of 7.6 out of 10, where one is 'very poor' and ten is 'very good'. From the interviews, a smaller number of learners (mainly younger users) felt that the system could be made more attractive, for example making it more colourful, less busy and simplifying the language.

Several older learners and those working with them, such as nextstep advisors, commented that they felt the system was targeted at younger learners. This is supported by the survey, in which of those who stated that the Apprenticeship vacancies system had made them *less* likely to apply for an Apprenticeship, the third most given reason was that they felt the system was only targeted at learners aged under 18.

Where perceptions of the system are negative, this is largely related to lack of success with finding a vacancy, due to either there not being any suitable vacancies on the system to apply for, or not getting any response to applications; i.e. largely relating to provider/employer behaviour in using the system, rather than issues with the system itself.

#### Approach to using the Apprenticeship vacancies system

From the online Learner survey, the majority of learners who register on the system do so because they are actively thinking about taking up an Apprenticeship, rather than simply to get more information on Apprenticeships generally. In the interim findings, the number of learners who answered that they had registered on the system 'to look and apply for Apprenticeship vacancies' amounted to 79 percent. This increased to 95 percent in the final phase survey. Only 5 percent responded that they had registered 'to get more information on Apprenticeships in general'. Therefore, it appears that those registering are genuinely seeking to take this vocational training route.

Reports from providers indicate that a number of learners are using the system to find employers offering Apprenticeships, and then applying directly to these employers; thus bypassing the system. This is supported by evidence from discussions with learners, a few of whom had taken this approach. This is not popular with many providers and employers, as it means that employers can be bombarded by applications or approaches from learners, which they expect providers to be managing on their behalf.

Also, in many cases learners have applied for a large number of Apprenticeships, some of which may not be particularly relevant and which learners may not follow up if their application is processed. For example, over 20 percent of learners surveyed had applied for more than 10 vacancies.<sup>10</sup> Providers have reported that on following up with learners, some have not responded:

*“We had a vacancy with 25 applications, only six turned up to an informal session prior to interview. If that were an employer offering formal interviews, what would they think? Some of the young people don’t take it seriously and apply to several positions they don’t follow up if offered an interview”* Provider focus group participant

This issue is currently being addressed through referral mechanisms to Connexions. Unsuccessful candidates will be rated by a number of criteria to indicate priorities for intervention; those who don’t attend a scheduled interview will be given the highest rating, so will be a priority for Connexions staff to contact and address the issues causing this, such as applications to unsuitable positions.

## Understanding of how the system works

Our research reveals that in some cases learners had incorrect or incomplete understanding about how the system operates, and who sees the information that they submit. Whilst it is not necessary for learners to understand the detailed workings of the system, in some cases this may affect learners’ use of the system. For instance, some providers and other stakeholders such as Connexions reported that some learners were misguided by the layout of the application form into thinking that it was an initial enquiry, rather than a formal application which would be passed on to employers. Therefore some forms were not completed appropriately or fully, for example using abbreviations (or ‘text speak’) and incomplete sentences. The new e-learning modules include a section on ‘writing and excellent application’, emphasising the importance of conveying a professional image from the application form.

Another example is the equal opportunities monitoring information, which all learners interviewed believed would be passed to employers (whereas in fact the information is only collected by NAS to monitor usage of the system). Therefore some learners may have submitted information here on the understanding that this would be fed to employers (for instance where they may expect to be included in positive action employment schemes), when in fact it was not. The use of this information is explained on the Terms and Conditions for the system, but this highlights the importance of ensuring that the use of all information collected explicitly states how it will be used and who will see it and is clearly flagged up to learners.

## Employers

### Perceptions of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

Most employers view the Apprenticeship vacancies system as a recruitment tool, which is available to them for free if they decide to recruit an apprentice externally. However the availability of this service is not a key factor in the decision of whether to offer an Apprenticeship in the first place, with over half of all employers surveyed stating that the

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<sup>10</sup> This is over a period of time, as only 10 applications are allowed to be submitted at one time.

Apprenticeship vacancies system has not affected their decision to offer Apprenticeships. Therefore a common perception of the Apprenticeship vacancies system is that it can be a useful tool, but is not a key factor in engaging them with Apprenticeships.

*“We’ve just used it as a tool, as part of our recruitment process. It’s just another thing that we use”* Employer interviewee

For some employers there is a perception that the system is not responsive, as a result of first having to work through NAS Employer Services to engage with the system, and then having to work through providers to use it. Nearly one in five employers surveyed (18 percent) stated that they were unlikely to recommend the system to another employer because they had to wait too long for a reply or the process takes too long. This is partly an issue with provider responsiveness and maintaining efficient communications with their employers; but it also reflects the system’s design in that employers mostly removed from direct interaction with the system.

The most positive perceptions of the Apprenticeship vacancies system seem to be from larger employers. Of those surveyed, employers with over 50 employees gave a higher overall score for the system than smaller organisations (employers with over 50 employees gave a mean score of 6.7 out of 10, those with between 10-49 employees scoring 4.9 and those with fewer than 10 scoring 5.5<sup>11</sup>). This is supported by our qualitative interviews, where large employers expressed the most benefit. This is largely because the system opens up their vacancies to a larger number of candidates from a larger geographical area:

*“It’s very very easy...This gives you the opportunity to advertise or make sure that your vacancy’s getting to be known in a wider sphere”* Large employer interviewee

For most employers who do recruit apprentices, the Apprenticeship vacancies system is used as one of a range of ways of advertising. Other routes in most cases continue to be used, such as advertising on their own websites, through Connexions and learning providers. Therefore the Apprenticeship vacancies system is used as one element of a broader strategy and process for recruitment.

## Providers

### Perceptions of the Apprenticeship vacancies system

As outlined in Chapter 4, some providers have encountered functionality issues that have made using the system more difficult. For several, the problems occurred at the earliest stages of using the system, such as setting up their profile or being linked to employers. Whilst some providers acknowledge that ‘teething problems’ are expected with the introduction of a new national system and express willingness to work through this, for others this has put them off using the system further. Ongoing changes to the system and to the name of the system, whilst improving functionality, create a perception of flux and uncertainty about the system.

A commonly held perception amongst providers is that there is not a significant business need from their perspective for a system such as the Apprenticeship vacancies system. The most significant barrier for many providers is integrating the Apprenticeship vacancies system with their business model or own processes. The consensus appears to be that running the system requires additional time and resources, and that it runs in parallel to existing systems rather than integrating with them. At this stage, providers would not be willing to replace their existing tried and tested systems with the Apprenticeship vacancies system, and therefore both have to be maintained: *“You used to have to do one thing, and now you have to do two to get the same result”* Provider focus group participant

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<sup>11</sup> However this difference is not statistically significant.

## Impact on behaviour

These factors have contributed to a lack of buy-in from providers into using the system, which is evidenced by the slow progress in providers actively using the system and uploading the majority of their vacancies onto it. To date, the majority of providers have not invested significant resources into integrating the system into their own processes; this seems to be reflective of a 'wait and see' approach, where providers are waiting to see if the Apprenticeship vacancies system is likely to become an essential (or even exclusive) route for applying for Apprenticeships before they commit to it.

## Other stakeholders

### Common practice in using the Apprenticeship vacancies system

Advisors interviewed, such as Connexions and nextstep staff and school teachers and careers officers, are using the system to signpost learners to Apprenticeship opportunities. Many of these advisors are encouraging learners to register on the system, and some give individual help to learners when they first start e.g. registering, initial search and help with applications. This appears to be widespread, as over a third of learners surveyed had first heard about the system via Connexions, Jobcentre Plus or school teachers/advisors.

Amongst Connexions staff, as well as signposting learners to the system, staff are using the system to keep up to date with local opportunities. Most Connexions offices have their own vacancies website or bulletin, and several have staff whose role is specifically to find vacancies with employers and keep their vacancies information up to date. In several cases Connexions offices have agreed data sharing agreements with NAS offices, to share information both ways on vacancies.

Currently most Connexions offices are continuing to operate their own vacancies information systems, though they also signpost to the Apprenticeship vacancies system. There is therefore some duplication of work, as staff are uploading information from the Apprenticeship vacancies system into other formats, such as internal databases. However several Connexions staff felt that they currently have more local information and more vacancies on their database than on the Apprenticeship vacancies system, and therefore would be reluctant to move solely to the latter. Connexions staff are not yet fully confident that all vacancies are being advertised on the system.

## Good Practice

The following section sets out examples of good practice more broadly around use of the system, such as promotion and partnership working. It also includes a number of more practical examples of best use of the system itself. The examples explored below are some which would be worth sharing with others across the NAS stakeholder network.

### Marketing and awareness-raising

Since the interim report, NAS has produced marketing materials for the Apprenticeship vacancies system aimed at learners and employers. Feedback suggests that these materials have been disseminated to most Connexions and nextstep offices, and that these are useful materials to engage clients. 12 percent of learners reported that they had received promotional materials from NAS and 10 percent received instruction/guidance materials on how to use the system. Therefore there has been a significant improvement in the materials available and dissemination of these materials.

There are also additional examples of good practice in promoting the system at a regional level. For instance in the East of England region, Connexions staff in conjunction with a local learning

provider set up a bus with computer facilities to tour the area, raising awareness of Apprenticeships and encouraging young people to register on the system.

In the North East, the NAS team have been working with a local school to develop a range of materials, including lesson plans for schools to deliver to inform pupils about the system and guide them through it.

There are examples in several regions where Connexions staff have assisted the matching process and raising awareness by sending letters to learners about specific vacancies on the system that may be of interest to them.

### Working in partnership with NAS

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. Regions have agreed or are in the process of finalising these agreements, and report that a good working relationship has been established with the local NAS team:

*“The way we’ve managed to work together in partnership has been exceptional”*  
Connexions interviewee

*“There are strong professional relationships that are now being built up”* Connexions interviewee

The type of information being shared includes information on local employers e.g. informing NAS Employer Services of those who are offering training opportunities which could be converted to Apprenticeships, and also information back to Connexions on learners such as feedback on their progress. This demonstrates an effective two-way information sharing process, to the benefit of both parties. The focus to date has been on developing relationships with Connexions staff, but this good practice can also be shared with others such as nextstep and Jobcentre Plus.

NAS teams have also developed positive relationships and good communications with providers, throughout the roll out of the system. This is strongest where regions have delivered a number of training days and workshops, so many provider staff can attend, and also one-to-one visits to help set up the system and resolve individual problems. NAS staff are attending local meetings in regions, such as Provider Network Meetings, and providers felt that they were able to give feedback and help in the development of the system.

### Examples of best use by providers

Following the interim report, CFE also produced four good-practice case studies of providers who have made best use of the Apprenticeship vacancies system and have been able to effectively integrate it into their processes. The case studies and additional ‘top tips’ flyer are available on the LSC’s Campaign Resources website.<sup>12</sup>

The common themes and areas of good practice by providers highlighted across these cases include:

- > Developing separate employer and learner profiles, with suitable information and language for each.

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<sup>12</sup> See [http://87.106.8.72/LSC/cat2\\_assets.asp?CAT2\\_ID=945&BRND\\_ID=17](http://87.106.8.72/LSC/cat2_assets.asp?CAT2_ID=945&BRND_ID=17)

- > Communicating the features and benefits of the Apprenticeship vacancies system to employers, for instance including in materials for employers on Apprenticeships.
- > Establishing good communications with employers to establish what they require and the details of the job- good practice includes developing templates for common Apprenticeship opportunities to use as a basis with employers and to show what information is needed.
- > Ensuring that the vacancy advert is as clear and effective as possible; for instance, making use of the ‘reality check’ and ‘important other information’ sections to clearly indicate what the role will involve; and making best use of the short description to make the vacancy stand out from others and attract the most suitable candidates.
- > Developing templates for application forms for similar Apprenticeships, including standard fields and example ‘additional information’ questions, which can be used to give a head-start for new vacancies.
- > Making best use of the ‘additional information’ questions, so that they are tailored to each case and provide sufficient information to the employer and provider to aid selection.
- > Clearly assigning responsibility for updating the system within the administrative team to those with suitable skills, and integrating this within their day-to-day role.
- > Integrating the information on the system with providers’ own tracking systems. This includes using the ‘report’ function to export data on advertised vacancies and starts.
- > Keeping all information on the system up to date, including closing dates, updating learners on their progress, and completing the vacancy on the system once the position has been filled (including when it has been filled by an ‘offline’<sup>13</sup> candidate).

It is important that providers include the information that is most valued by learners. Learners surveyed indicated what factors most affected their decision as to whether to apply for a vacancy or not; the most important factors are the future prospects for the role, the qualifications included as part of the training, and the job/role description (See Figure 23 opposite). This highlights the type of information that providers should prioritise in including in the vacancy advert, in order to get the best response and highest calibre candidates.

Providers demonstrating this best practice and using the system effectively have found that it brings a number of advantages:

*“Attracting the right people for an Apprenticeship can be difficult. Apprenticeship vacancies helped us reach a wider audience. We had many more candidates than last year.”* Provider case study

*“It’s allowed us to operate more efficiently and offer professional services to employers outside of our immediate local area. Where we can advertise a vacancy on their behalf, it’s easier to manage the processes”* Provider case study

*“We’ve found it a more professional tool; guiding people directly to the website means they can view all our current vacancies with no hassle. It’s a better way for us to communicate with them and it saves us time.”* Provider case study

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<sup>13</sup> This is where a vacancy is filled by a candidate who is not listed on the Manage Vacancy ladder on Apprenticeship vacancies. This includes learners that have been redirected to this vacancy as a result of an application made for another vacancy, or where the application route is through the employer’s own online recruitment site.

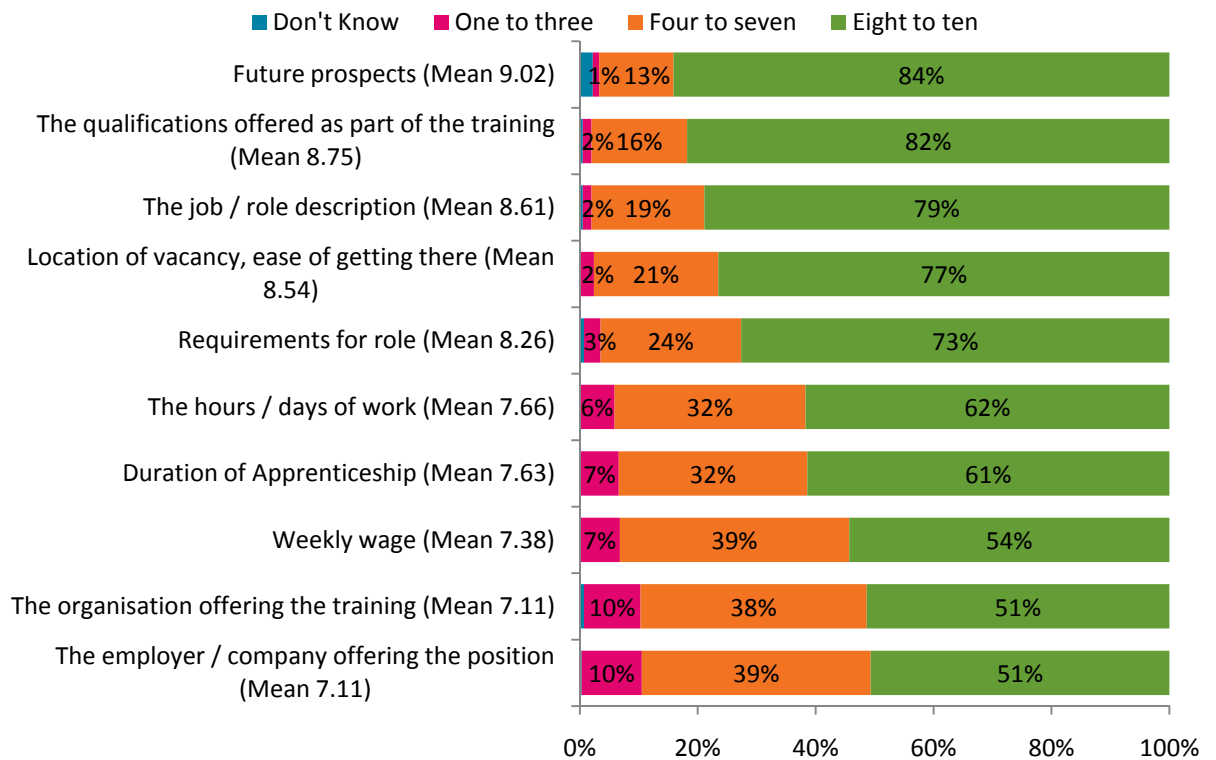


Figure 23: How important are the following factors when deciding which Apprenticeship vacancy to apply for? Source: Learner Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 761)

## E-recruitment and disabled learners- best practice

This section examines recommendations and best practise from literature evaluating online recruitment in terms of access and equity for disabled users, in context of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. This includes Barrier Free e-Recruitment, the use of Guaranteed Interview Schemes and other standards applied in the public and private sector. Issues of technical Web accessibility are not discussed here, as the Apprenticeship vacancy system has separate accessibility auditing and review in hand.

### Recruiting disabled users

In the workplace, public and private sector business have differing approaches to recruitment and disability. Since 2006, there has been a Disability Equality Duty on all public sector organisations to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people.<sup>14</sup> This duty includes gathering information on the recruitment, development and retention of disabled employees, and developing and reporting detailed actions and progress towards disability equality. Many public sector employers monitor the number of disabled candidates at the application, short-list and job offer stages for public scrutiny. In terms of online recruitment, strategies frequently focus on foregrounding equality commitments and awards in recruitment material.

Best practice in recruitment in the private sector falls predominantly into two categories; **Positive action**, where employers have worked in partnership with third sector organisations<sup>15</sup> to recruit directly from under-represented groups; and the adoption and promotion of **inclusion standards** which assess and validate an employers' commitment to inclusion for disabled people.

<sup>14</sup> See: <http://www.dotheduty.org/>

<sup>15</sup> For example: The Shaw Trust, Remploy and Roles4all

In terms of the Apprenticeship vacancy system, Positive Action echoes the IES recommendation that Apprenticeships need to engage disabled learners, reiterating the importance of targeted publicity and recruitment initiatives (IES, 2009). The IES report identifies three barriers to disabled people's participation, including a lack of tailored and specialist support in the workplace for disabled apprentices and employers' misperceptions around the limited abilities of disabled people to undertake particular jobs (p. 5). Such social and attitudinal factors are difficult to address in the scope of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. However, steps to improve inclusion can be taken.

High profile inclusion standards provide ways to improve online Apprentice recruitment for disabled users. Several accredited standards, awards and tools exist for employers seeking to promote an ethos that engages disabled people.<sup>16</sup> Here we consider two major approaches – the Disability Symbol, awarded by Jobcentre Plus and resources on e-Recruitment developed for the Employers Forum on Disability.

### Guaranteed Interview Schemes

Guaranteed Interview Schemes are a high profile and widely adopted means to engaging disabled applicants both online and through traditional media. In these cases, any applicant disclosing a disability recognised by the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) may opt into the scheme and be guaranteed an interview with the proviso that they meet the minimum criteria of the job specification. Here we consider the Disability Symbol approach to Guaranteed Interviews.



The 'two ticks' Disability Symbol (pictured) is a mark of recognition given by Jobcentre Plus to employers who have agreed to take action to meet five commitments in recruitment, training, retention, consultation and disability awareness. These commitments include:

**“Commitment 1:** Recruitment – interviewing all disabled applicants who meet the minimum conditions for a job vacancy and considering them based on their abilities.

**Commitment 5:** Reviewing progress and keeping people informed – each year, reviewing the 5 commitments and what has been achieved, and planning ways to improve on them and let employees and us know about your progress and future plans.”

Employers who make a commitment to honour these points are then authorised and encouraged to use the 'positive about disabled people' disability symbol on their recruitment materials.

In regards to the Apprenticeship vacancies system, the impetus should be on employers to include any evidence of inclusive ethos/practices and workplace awards<sup>17</sup> with their Apprenticeship advertisements. However the system can facilitate this by providing space for logos and explanatory text explaining employer engagement with inclusion and disability online in each Apprenticeship advert. This could include policies which govern recruitment and/or

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<sup>16</sup> For example: The Disability Standard, awarded by the Employer's Forum on Disability; The Mindful Employer Initiative: 'Charter for Employers who are Positive about Mental Health'; and The Gold Standard Diversity Accreditation.

<sup>17</sup> e.g. BiTC Realising Ability Award, Remploy Leading the Way Awards

highlight guaranteed interview for disabled applicants. This should also include explanatory text/links to further information for applicants who have not encountered such logos or workplace awards before.

Whilst this is an example of current good practice in positive action, Guaranteed Interview Schemes are not a cure-all, however. Key concerns relate to auditing and monitoring, and disclosure of disability. Pre and post-Scheme measures demonstrating the effectiveness of Guaranteed Interview Schemes are scarce. In the case of the Two Tick Scheme, monitoring is undertaken by employers and Jobcentre Plus, who review progress against the objectives on a yearly basis (Jobcentre Plus, 2010). As such, this process is dependent on self-review, rather than independent monitoring. The TUC have observed that the lack of independent auditing and evidence that some employers do not sufficiently review their practices has served to discredit the scheme amongst disabled people (TUC, 2006).

### Disabled applicants' perspectives

Anecdotal accounts of Guaranteed Interview Schemes from disabled applicants' perspectives offer frank insight into issues for disabled people considering using Guaranteed Interview Schemes (BBC Ouch!, 2009). Some disabled people view interview priority as very welcome move towards inclusion, however, as disability is not experienced as a binary category, some disabled applicants face a moral dilemma over whether they are 'disabled enough'. Uncertainty about what constitutes a significant disability may mean that they do not take advantage of the Scheme or make a declaration. Therefore the Apprenticeship vacancies system should illustrate what is meant by disability so people who may not generally consider themselves to be disabled (e.g. people with dyslexia; people with diabetes) do not experience discrimination.

Amongst those job-seekers who do self-identify as disabled, responses to Guaranteed Interview can be mixed. Commentators observe that a guaranteed interview does not necessarily guarantee that discrimination in the interview process will not occur. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that some who have applied for such a 'guaranteed interview' within the terms of the Scheme have not been offered an interview (breaking the terms of their commitment). This requires careful communications, so that reasons for not inviting disabled applicants to interview, such as not meeting the minimum level required, are explained clearly to learners.

### Equal opportunities monitoring and inclusion schemes

Currently the Apprenticeship vacancies system collects information from registered users to evidence usage of the system in relation to equal opportunities. This information is only shared internally with NAS and is not passed on to the employer. However a number of employers interviewed reported that they would like to have information on data collected via equal opportunities monitoring, such as disability and ethnicity, in order to support their own positive action schemes:

*"Because of the Disability Discrimination Act, a lot of employers would want to actually give guaranteed interviews to those young people who consider themselves to have a disability. There's no way on the system of actually highlighting that"* Employer interviewee

This presents a challenge that needs to be addressed, as Equal Opportunities monitoring should not be confused with Guaranteed Interview by recruiters. Where this information is shared with the interviewer, the applicant's right to compete at interview in the usual way is withdrawn. As a result an explicit separation between a Scheme and Monitoring is vital. The Equality and Human Rights Commission demonstrate this clarity on their vacancies page:

#### **Guaranteed Interview Form**

"This form will not be passed to the shortlist panel but will be retained by the recruitment team until the list of candidates for interview is compiled." (EHRC, 2010)

### Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form

“This form will help the Commission identify the people applying for each vacancy so that we can identify trends and review our recruitment processes. The monitoring form is voluntary but the information here is very useful as it allows us to monitor the effectiveness of our policy of equal opportunities in employment. The monitoring form is detached from the application form when we receive it and it has no part in the short-listing process.”

The BBC also report the importance of confidentiality supporting disclosure: *"We know that confidentiality throughout the recruitment process is essential. Information given by applicants regarding their disability does not form part of selection and is separated from the application prior to short-listing."* (EDF, 2004).

Therefore a number of precautions need to be taken into account before sharing this type of information with employers. Firstly, equal opportunities monitoring should include clear statements of use and confidentiality, so applicants understand how their information will be used. Submissions to guaranteed interview should then be kept apart from equal opportunities monitoring. Finally, when short-listing, all information on disability, if taken for the purposes of monitoring, must be kept separate from the rest of the application.

### Barrier Free e-Recruitment<sup>18</sup>

The Employer's Forum on Disability and partners identify four key barriers to the recruitment of disable people online. These are described in the diagram below (Figure 24):

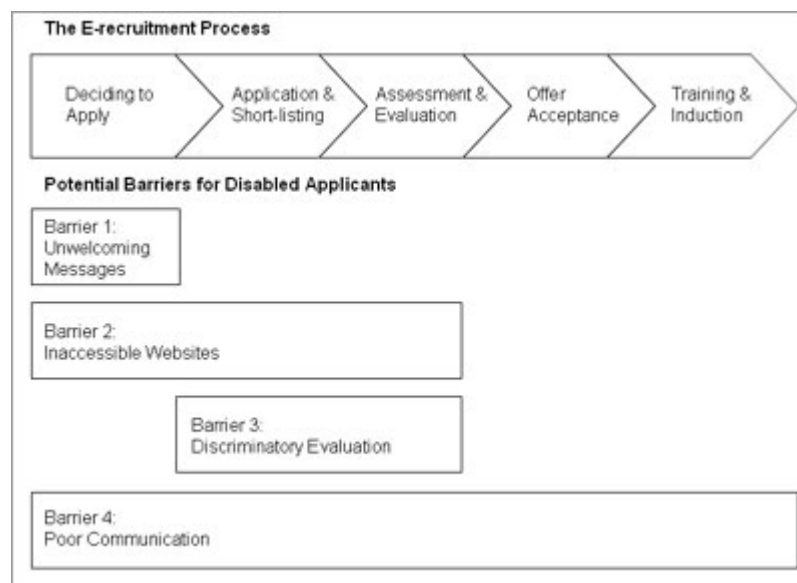


Figure 24: Potential Barriers for Disabled Applicants in the E-recruitment Process (EFD, 2004)

Discriminatory language and negative assumptions constitute ‘unwelcoming messages’. As well as removing these unwelcoming messages, emphasis should be placed on ensuring welcoming messages, for which the EDF has established a list of best practices. Some of these messages have already been drawn upon in relation to Guaranteed Interview and promoting inclusive messages or drawing attention to disability awards. Within the scope of the Apprentices vacancies system further steps to encourage inclusivity include:

- > Communicate employer willingness to make adjustment, e.g. give examples of how at different stages of the recruitment process, a range of adjustments can be made;

<sup>18</sup> [<http://www.barrierfree-recruitment.com>]

- > Provide a description of the recruitment process so applicants can anticipate their adjustment needs at any particular stage;
- > If testimonials are available, include testimonials from employees with disabilities which highlight the adjustments made by the employer;
- > Consider including a question on whether applications from disabled people are welcome amongst any frequently asked questions (FAQs) on the Apprenticeship vacancies system;
- > Avoid just asking, 'Do you have a disability?' – candidates may not want to share this information nor feel it is relevant. Instead ask whether the candidate needs any adjustments made for a reason related to a disability.

The EDF further state that it is helpful if advertisements describe what must be done (e.g. 'You will need to produce high quality reports using a word processing package') rather than stated how a task must be accomplished (e.g. 'Must touch type'). A disabled applicant may then meet this criterion using voice-activated assistive technologies. This ensures a person description is based on a 'well-framed specification, not stereotypes' (EDF, 2004). Therefore Advertisement wording should focus on the task, not assumptions about how it should be accomplished.

### Summary

In summary, the Apprenticeship vacancy system must ensure that any engagement with disability and equality on the part of employers is visible to applicants rather than assumed. Welcoming messages are desirable and it is important to make sure that the recruitment process is transparent and understandable for disabled applicants. Guaranteed interviews offer a way to help ensure recruitment is inclusive, but this needs careful monitoring to ensure effectiveness.

## Chapter 7 Summary

- > The majority of those who are registered on the system are using it to actively search and apply for vacancies, and it is the primary resource for many learners. However, for providers and employers the Apprenticeship vacancies system is seen as one of several routes for advertising Apprenticeships, and not a catch-all solution to recruitment. As a result, expectations are misaligned; this needs to be addressed so that there is a common message about the positioning of the Apprenticeship vacancies system so that expectations are managed.
- > There are a number of cases of good practice which demonstrate how the Apprenticeship vacancies system can be made best use of. Providers are keen for these types of cases to be shared ahead of their contractual commitment to using the system, so that they can make the process as easy as possible.
- > There are also a number of good practice lessons to be learned in terms of engaging disabled learners with the system. Although the impetus is on employers, the Apprenticeship vacancies system should allow space for the promotion of inclusion standards and ensure the system offers welcoming messages for all learners.

## 8 | Impact on Apprenticeships

This section focuses on how the Apprenticeship vacancies system has affected several aspects of Apprenticeships. It examines whether the system has influenced the awareness, perceptions and brand value of Apprenticeships.

Furthermore, it describes how the system is likely to affect the market of Apprenticeships by changing the parameters of their demand and supply. The system's value, as indicated by how strongly it intermediates candidates' success in finding an Apprenticeship, is also assessed.

### Impact on learners

As already discussed (see Chapter 5), the Apprenticeship vacancies system is viewed positively by learners in the survey, when compared to alternative services of similar nature. Our findings suggest that the system receives positive reviews especially regarding the quality of the information it disseminates or how easy its use is, and learners attribute to it a large range of advantages compared to other resources or services for applying for Apprenticeships.

In fact, our empirical findings show that just below one-third (30 percent) of the learners in our survey would not have applied for an Apprenticeship if the system did not exist. What is more, a further one-third (36 percent) admits they would have applied for fewer places (Figure 25).

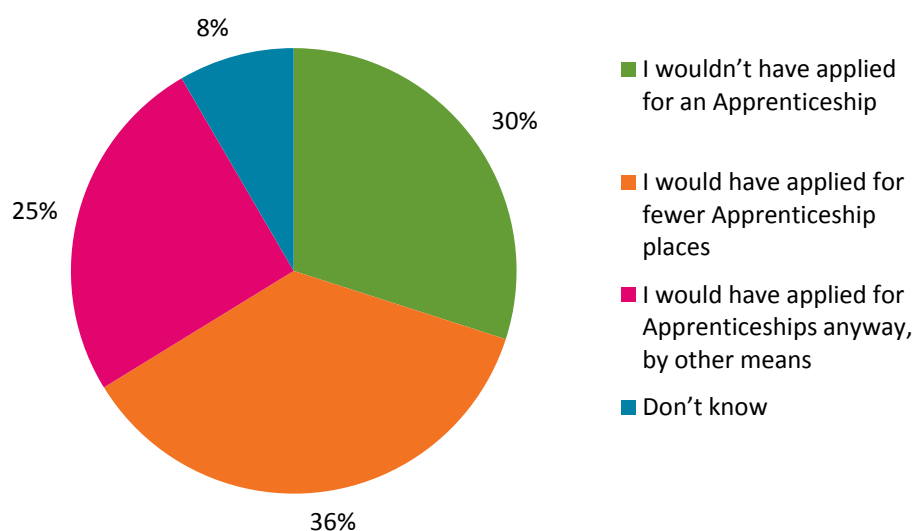
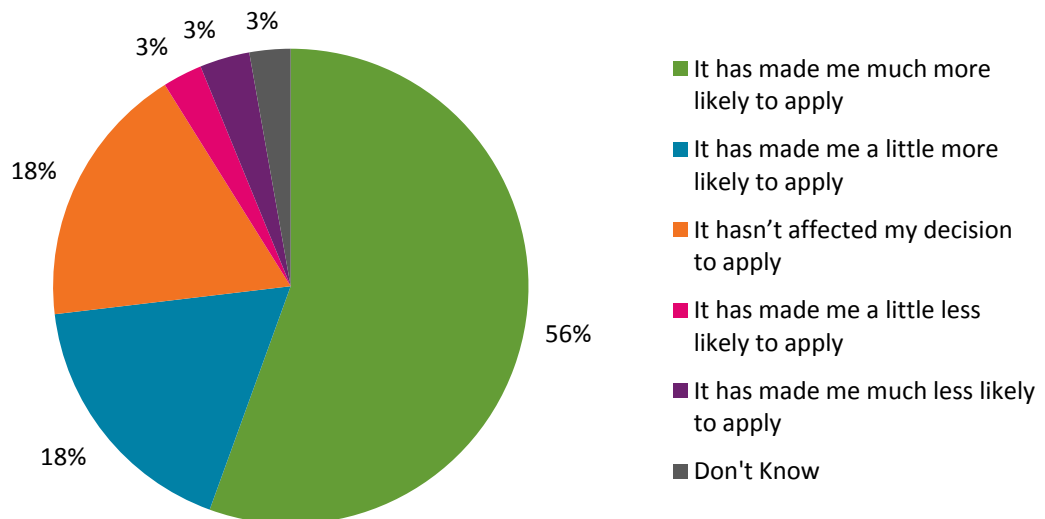


Figure 25: What would have happened if the Apprenticeship vacancies system did not exist? Source: Learner Online Survey (Base= 824)

Indeed, our analysis reveals that the system weighs significantly in learners' decision to apply for an Apprenticeship. Just below three-fifths (56 percent) of our respondents state that the system made it much more likely for them to apply while, a further fifth (18 percent) also responded positively, indicating that the system had made them slightly more likely to apply. A very small proportion of respondents (6 percent) attribute to the system a negative impact on their probability to apply for Apprenticeships (Figure 26)



**Figure 26: How has the Apprenticeship vacancies system influenced your decision to apply for an Apprenticeship?** Source: Learner Online Survey (Base= 824)

### Increasing awareness and application rates

The overall positive impact on the likelihood to apply for an Apprenticeship stems from a variety of reasons, as outlined in Chapter 5. The evidence suggests that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has made learners more aware of what kind of Apprenticeships are available in general, as well as specific opportunities. This is supported by the finding that seven in ten learners (71 percent) did not have any contact with the organisations offering the Apprenticeship prior to using the Apprenticeship vacancies system, indicating that the system is the first point of contact for most learners. It has also made it easier to search and apply for vacancies, which also accounts for the positive impact of the system on learners actually applying.

The above figures emphasise that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has a strong impact on learners' access to Apprenticeship opportunities, and on their actual behaviour in applying for positions. This is supported by qualitative evidence:

*"I thought the only Apprenticeships were for lads, I didn't realise there were a variety of Apprenticeships until I looked at that site"* Learner discussion group participant

*"I would have had to apply individually to different learning providers and employers. Apprenticeship vacancies swayed me to apply"* Learner interviewee

This suggests that the Apprenticeship vacancies system, alongside the Apprenticeships website, has helped improve the perception and added value to the Apprenticeship brand.

### Impact of success rates

A significant proportion of our respondents, exceeding a quarter of our sample (28 percent), report having succeeded in actually securing an Apprenticeship through the system. This is higher than the success rate overall, calculated from NAS's MI, which indicates that 16 percent of candidates who have made an application were successfully matched in the year since the system's launch.

What is most important though is that positive impact of the system is not reported only from its successful users. Participants who may have failed in finding an Apprenticeship still find that

the system improved their experience regarding Apprenticeships. The analysis shows that, amongst learners who applied unsuccessfully for an Apprenticeship, the 'process of applying for vacancies', of 'finding a vacancy' or of 'finding general information' scored mean ratings of 7.6, 7.5 and 7.5, respectively where 10 means 'very improved'.

## Ethnicity

In our survey ethnicity does not appear to induce any differentiations regarding the experience of the Apprenticeships vacancy system. Respondents from White, Asian or Asian-British, Black or Black-British, Chinese, Mixed or other ethnic backgrounds have equivalent success rates in finding an Apprenticeship through the system. Their likelihood to apply for Apprenticeships is influenced positively and to the same extent and they rate their overall experience of the system as equally improved.

## Disabled and non-disabled apprentices

Interestingly, despite lower proportions of disabled users overall compared against the population, disabled users of the system in the survey report an equivalent success rate to that of non-disabled users. This finding is very important in that it indicates that disability is not a barrier in successfully using the system, once engaged. It must be noted though that this finding does not contradict the findings of the IES report in that it only assess the outcome for disabled persons who actually accessed the system; it does not assess whether access to the system is equivalent for disabled and non-disabled persons interested in taking up Apprenticeships.

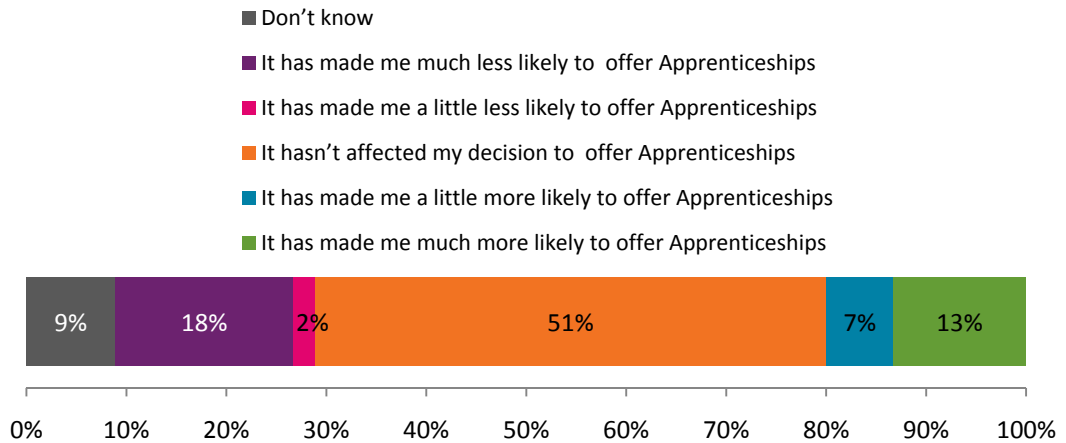
Besides, our findings suggest that disabled users rate their overall experience regarding Apprenticeships as less improved when compared to non-disabled users. In fact, disabled respondents give a mean rating of 6.6 on a scale where 10 means 'very improved', in contrast to non-disabled respondents, who score a 7.4 on average. Furthermore, while 58 percent of non-disabled respondents state that the system has made it much more likely for them to apply for a vacancy, only a 42 percent of the disabled respondents report the same.

Even though disabled users' experience of the system is in fact improved compared to alternative resources or services for finding Apprenticeships, they seem somewhat less enthusiastic than non-disabled users. This finding appears to be in line with the inclusion concerns expressed in the IES report and indicates that action needs to be taken to tackle the issues that undermine this group's experience of the service.

## Impact on employers

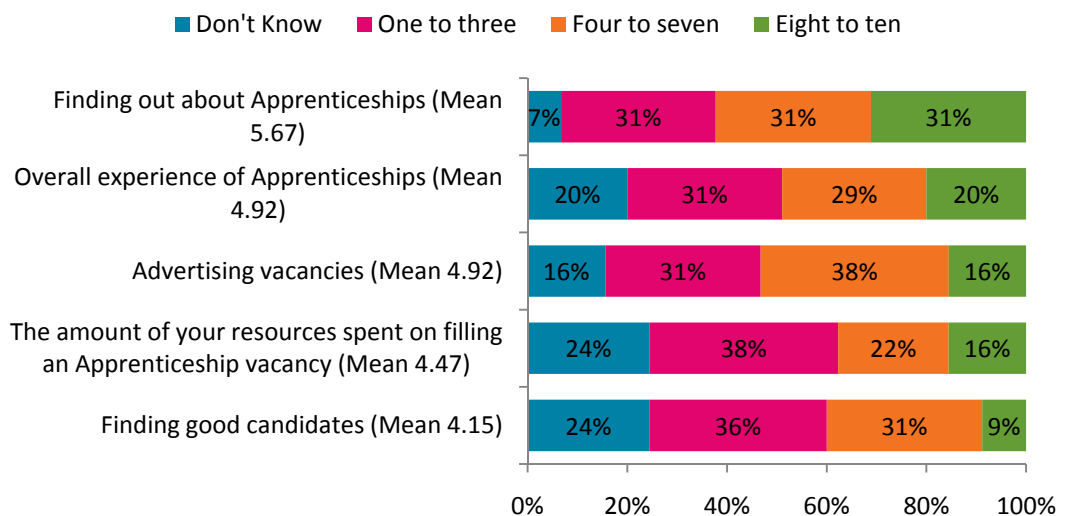
Out of those employers who have used the Apprenticeship vacancies system, more than half (14/26) report that if the system did not exist, they would still continue to offer Apprenticeships. Even though this finding is based on a small number of responses and generalisations should be attempted with great cautiousness, this finding may be revealing that for employers, the decision to recruit apprentices is a solid, strategic decision they would try to realise despite the external resources available to them. In other words, this finding perhaps signifies an almost inelastic relationship between the supply of Apprenticeships and the existence of systems that facilitate Apprenticeship recruitment.

This assumption is further supported by the fact that half of those who were aware of the system (23/45) in the survey state that the Apprenticeships vacancy system has not affected their decision to offer an Apprenticeship (Figure 27). Perhaps interestingly, a fifth (9/45) reports the system's positive impact on their likelihood to offer Apprenticeships while another fifth (9/45) reports the opposite.



**Figure 27: How has the Apprenticeship vacancies system influenced your decision to offer Apprenticeship vacancies?** Source: Employer Online Survey (Base= 45)

Regarding how much the system has improved the experience around Apprenticeships across several key areas, our empirical evidence shows that employers' views are much more reserved compared to those of learners. On a scale where, again, 10 means 'very improved', only the processes of finding information about Apprenticeships scored above the mid-point of the scale with a mean rating of 5.67 – a score that signifies that employers attribute a marginal improvement in this area (Figure 28).



**Figure 28: How much has the Apprenticeship vacancies system improved the following aspects of Apprenticeship recruitment?** Source: Employer Online Survey (Distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, base= 45)

Overall, this supports the finding that the Apprenticeship vacancies system, as a recruitment tool, is not a significant factor in engaging employers with Apprenticeships. Recruiting suitable employees to fill an Apprenticeship does not seem to be a significant issue for employers; of those surveyed who do not currently offer Apprenticeships, only one employer gave the reason 'we did not know how to go about recruiting an apprentice'. When employers who were not aware of the Apprenticeship vacancies system were asked what they would value from a support service for Apprenticeships, the most widely supported option was 'general information about Apprenticeships'. It therefore appears that a priority should be information sharing about what an Apprenticeship involves, rather than investing resources in helping with one part of the journey, i.e. recruitment.

## Impact on Apprenticeship starts

The latest Apprenticeship vacancies MI report shows that 6,750 Apprenticeship starts were secured through the Apprenticeship vacancies system from its launch to January 2010.

Given that the Apprenticeship vacancies system was launched in January 2009 and has not been operational over a full academic year, it is difficult to measure against overall Apprenticeship numbers as these are measured by academic year. In the 2008/09 academic year there were 239,900 Apprenticeship starts.<sup>19</sup> In addition, there were 95,800 Apprenticeship programme starts in the first quarter of 2009-10.

Looking at projected figures for the 2009/10 academic year, the NAS planning assumptions for this period indicates an expected volume of 249,400 Apprenticeship starts for this period. This is likely to be revised upwards, given commitments to expand Apprenticeships further for over 19 year olds. Of these, some won't be a viable market for the Apprenticeship vacancies system, such as conversions of existing employees onto an Apprenticeship, or Programme-led Apprenticeships. Taking this into account, NAS' KPIs for the system indicates a target of advertising 30,000 vacancies, with 60 percent of these vacancies (of those that are completed and processed in this period) being filled by a successful candidate.

It would seem that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has a limited contribution to the overall number of starts to date within the Apprenticeships market. Our evidence suggests that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is only a key factor for a few employers as to whether they offer an Apprenticeship or not, therefore of the vacancies advertised on the system, only a small minority would not have taken place without the Apprenticeship vacancies system. However, the assumptions are drawn based on the available data are only preliminary; further investigation needs to be undertaken to assess the system's actual impact on Apprenticeship starts. Recognition should also be given to the fact that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is still a relatively new initiative, and that data trends indicate future growth.

Therefore the evidence of impact to date on the number of Apprenticeship starts via the Apprenticeship vacancies system, and initial evidence that the Apprenticeship vacancies system is not a key factor for most employers considering offering Apprenticeships, suggests that the Apprenticeship vacancies system will have limited impact on the number of new Apprenticeship starts.

### Chapter 8 Summary

- > The Apprenticeship vacancies system has positively impacted on the number of learners applying for Apprenticeships, by making the information easier to find and providing a straightforward process for applying. It is therefore an important factor in influencing learners' decisions to pursue an Apprenticeship.
- > However, the system does not have the same impact on employers' decisions to offer Apprenticeships, and is currently not seen as a key factor in influencing this decision. This difference in impact on behaviour between employers and learners is therefore likely to exacerbate the current imbalance of supply of places against demand.
- > At the current scale of successful matches, the system only has a marginal impact on the number of Apprenticeship starts. Projections for the number of starts via the system, and initial indication that only a small minority would not have taken place without the Apprenticeships vacancies system, suggest that the contribution of the Apprenticeship vacancies system to new Apprenticeship starts is small.

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<sup>19</sup> The Data Service, 'Statistical first release' December 2009

## 9 | Conclusions and recommendations

This final chapter draws together conclusions from the evaluation and summarises the key findings.

The strengths and areas for improvement of the Apprenticeship vacancies system are considered against original aims and stakeholder expectations; these factors cover both design and implementation. We also consider the system's operational achievements; our conclusions form the basis of a number of recommendations.

### Conclusions

#### Evaluating the Apprenticeship vacancies system

The Apprenticeship vacancies system has had significant benefits for learners, and for NAS in engaging learners and maintaining their involvement. The findings we report clearly demonstrate the potential of an online system as a tool through which NAS can develop and manage the supply of applicants for Apprenticeships.

If employer engagement and usage of the Apprenticeship vacancies system were to approach anything like the same levels as learners, then the system could have substantial benefits in creating a much more co-ordinated, liquid market. Employers would have access to a wider pool of applicants, applicants a wider range of opportunities, and the prospect of better matching could in turn lead to better outcomes for the public investment in Apprenticeships.

But the current Apprenticeship vacancies system is a long way from this vision. Employers have little awareness, let alone understanding, engagement or use of the system. Providers use the system to some extent, but primarily as a substitute for methods that they were already using. At present, the vision does not seem to be reflected in the way the system works, and nor does it seem to be having the anticipated impact on Apprenticeship delivery.

Specifically, the number of vacancies advertised on the system, and the number of successful matches between learners and employers, are disappointing when compared to the expectations for the system or the existing volumes of Apprenticeship activity, even taking into account the effect of recession. Our findings here suggest that the Apprenticeship vacancies system has been effective in engaging learners in an online system which can help them; but not that it has improved the market's matching and co-ordination, let alone that it has improved the scale or shape of employer demand.

#### Design and development

The history of the Apprenticeship vacancies system explains many of these findings. The system has undergone many changes in the journey from initial concept through to implemented technology. The initial vision was for a 'one stop shop' for Apprenticeships, which would enable learners and employers to find each other, and allow providers and NAS to work with them to follow an initial match through to a successful Apprenticeship delivery. There are substantial benefits from such a model: a more liquid market makes for better matching between learners and employers; accessible technology lowers the barriers to engagement; and an online system allows for low-cost engagement by smaller employers, allowing greater reach for NAS and also encouraging greater ownership of the delivery process among employers.

But this vision seems not to have been translated into design. Development was always going to be complex; the Apprenticeships delivery process involves many stakeholders and Apprenticeships are a complex product. Design needed to be founded upon a clear model of how employers, providers and learners would use the system, how they would relate to one

another, and why using the system would represent a gain to them compared to existing approaches.

### Learner and employer usage

In implementation, the system has answered these questions clearly for learners, but left them much more open for employers and providers. The existing model leaves employers outside the system – for them, it is ‘hidden wiring’ that brings learners and providers together. The consequence is that it has little benefit for them in terms of easier engagement for employers, greater ownership for employers, or greater reach for NAS.

Providers have been given a role, but with only limited consideration as to how it will ease their task, compared to existing methods. Feedback from many providers concerns the system’s practical limitations rather than its benefits. The system is perceived to have duplicated many existing processes or activities, but in putting them into an online system, removed the practical flexibility which often enabled them to work effectively. For this reason, many providers have been reticent about engaging with the system, and few are willing to use it to advertise all of their vacancies.

### The need for better analysis of the Apprenticeship market

In part, the design of the system reflects common practice in Apprenticeship delivery, by placing the learner-provider relationship at its centre. Yet an Apprenticeship is a three-way arrangement, involving the employer too; if anything, the vision of the Apprenticeship vacancies system (and perhaps NAS more generally) is that providers should play an enabling and supporting role to the employer-learner relationship.

Until such tensions between vision and implementation are resolved, our findings from this evaluation suggest that the system will not become the central exchange for applying for and placing Apprenticeship vacancies. Further improvements to the system need to be founded upon a much clearer analysis of the Apprenticeship delivery process and how an online system may be able to enhance it – for learners, but also for employers and providers, and for NAS too.

### Lessons learned

It is important to be clear that the ‘one stop shop’ vision for the Apprenticeship vacancies system is widely accepted and endorsed within the market. The benefit of a convenient learner application mechanism is also substantial. The system has engaged significant numbers of learners, and improved their experience of searching and applying for vacancies. These benefits allow for more informed learners, applying for a wider range of more appropriate vacancies. These are significant gains; and the support for the vision suggests that there remains value to be added by an Apprenticeship vacancies system that can deliver on the vision.

The risk is that the progress made so far becomes an obstacle to the achievement of the vision. The Apprenticeship vacancies system *has* been successful in engaging many learners. But our findings suggest that it has not been anywhere near as effective in developing or channelling the supply of Apprenticeship vacancies. And so the full benefits of a system are still to be realised; but moving the current system to deliver on the vision may represent a substantial commitment for NAS – and certainly, there will need to be some reflection on the extent to which the benefits of change can be best achieved by incremental improvements or transition to a new and substantially different system.

## Recommendations

The high levels of engagement with the vision and concept for a vacancy clearing house, and the obvious potential benefits in terms of better learner and employer engagement, lower engagement and delivery cost, and greater reach and intelligence for NAS, all suggest a real potential for a strong Apprenticeship vacancies system to drive achievement against NAS' strategic goals. However the current system does not seem to deliver on the vision. Consideration should be given as to the role of the system in NAS' wider strategy, as well as its role in the Apprenticeship delivery process – especially as that process changes, as a result of NAS' evolving operating model and changes to Apprenticeships themselves.

**Recommendation 1:** Consider the role of the Apprenticeship vacancies system within the evolving Apprenticeship marketplace and NAS' operating model. Draw upon this evaluation, but also other models in the commercial sector (e.g. online recruitment services, online application services), to define a blueprint for the development of the Apprenticeship vacancies system, on the basis of robust analysis. Through the same review, estimate the costs and benefits of different change options, to identify where and how change to the vacancies system might best contribute to NAS' objectives.

Such a review will help at least by identifying the range of ambition NAS has for the use of an online system, given its other priorities, and given the potential available. As noted above, it may be that incremental change will deliver less value than a more radical break; but the costs of such options need to be understood, and only pursued on the basis of robust analysis of the marketplace. Based on our evaluation, we can offer a starting point for such a review, and will present this to NAS outside of this report.

### Engaging employers

The concept for the Apprenticeship vacancies system was based on developing an equivalent system to the UCAS system for University applications. That example points to a simple provider-learner relationship, but Apprenticeships are not simply about learning, they link into employment. The consequence is that employers have been put outside of the system's core design, so that they are not engaged in its operation. This contrasts markedly with other online recruitment tools commonly used by employers, where they take an active role in advertising for vacancies and sorting applications. In considering options for the future development of the system, this employment dimension, and the central role of employer participation, needs to be considered.

The focus for NAS Employer Services staff to date has been on larger employers (with 150 or more employees), as the returns in terms of number of Apprenticeships per employer are likely to be higher. A possible direction of travel for the Apprenticeship vacancies system could be to make it a more central tool to engage more employers in Apprenticeships, especially small to medium enterprises (SMEs). This would enable them to do more to help themselves, without the need for such intensive support from NAS staff – lowering the engagement cost, lowering the maintenance cost, and enhancing NAS' reach.

If employers were to be able to use the system directly, regulation of the quality of vacancies and data protection and security would need to be considered. Currently the suitability of an employer to offer an Apprenticeship is assessed by intermediaries such as NAS ESMs and providers prior to the vacancy being advertised. Some form of screening would need to continue to ensure that vacancies advertised are genuine Apprenticeships and employers meet required employment laws. Personal data collected for recruitment would also need to adhere to the Data Protection Act (1998), in terms of the use and security of personal information.

Guidelines from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)<sup>20</sup> indicate that applicant's information can be passed to employers directly or via providers acting as an 'agency', as long as the applicant is made aware of who will see their information and for what purpose. The guidelines also state that a secure method of transmission must be used for sending applications online (e.g. encryption-based software). Therefore any employer access to the system would need to meet these requirements, such as being password protected.

**Recommendation 2:** Employers could have a much more direct role in using the Apprenticeship vacancies system, allowing them to upload their vacancies and manage them directly. This would need to take into consideration the roles of other intermediaries (e.g. providers and NAS advisors) in supporting and screening employers, and the security of personal data collected through the system. A potential model is to allow employers to have direct access to certain areas of their account, such as vacancy descriptions and candidate applications, in addition to providers' administrative access.

**Recommendation 3:** A wider range of partners should be able to access and update employer vacancies, including Connexions, nextstep and Jobcentre Plus employer engagement staff. This would help in the task of making the system a central clearinghouse – as with employers and providers, making the Apprenticeship vacancies system of benefit to partners should be a key design principle if it is to be successful.

A particular issue that needs to be addressed immediately is the poor experience of some employers who have contacted the Helpline or dealt with Employer Services. The cause of the delay in responding to enquiries requires investigation of the NAS call centre's process and protocols for handling employer enquiries, to ensure that they are not lost in the system or that there are minimal delays in the handover to Employer Services staff for further support. NAS should consider an account management approach whereby employers are assigned a specific contact within NAS who they can deal with.

**Recommendation 4:** Service levels for employer enquiries and ongoing relationship management should be reviewed, along with their management and monitoring arrangements, to ensure they are suitably responsive and supportive. As NAS itself evolves its operating model and delivery processes, its support resources need to develop to meet the requirements they create.

## Integrating with other systems

The Apprenticeship vacancies system sits within a broader landscape of training and employment, in which simplification is an increasingly important consideration. Another option to consider for the future is therefore to integrate the Apprenticeship vacancies system with existing online tools for searching and applying for employment or training. An obvious example is the Jobcentre Plus recruitment site which is currently relocating to the DirectGov website. As this system is developing, it could be possible to integrate many of the functions NAS requires, for identifying and advertising Apprenticeship opportunities. In considering the option, NAS would need to be assured that working through such a system would enhance, rather than detract from, the Apprenticeship brand, and whether it could resolve the three-way relationship involved in Apprenticeships.

Another online system that is being developed is the Common Applications Process, which will be available for all 14-19 year olds to apply for any training opportunity. The intention is for this to integrate with the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Practical steps need to be taken to ensure that this is more than simply signposting between the two systems, and that there is some functional integration between the two to ensure that young people are not required to

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<sup>20</sup> See

[http://www.ico.gov.uk/upload/documents/library/data\\_protection/practical\\_application/coi\\_html/english/employment\\_practices\\_code/part\\_1-recruitment\\_and\\_selection\\_2.html](http://www.ico.gov.uk/upload/documents/library/data_protection/practical_application/coi_html/english/employment_practices_code/part_1-recruitment_and_selection_2.html)

use the two systems in parallel. Also, where the Apprenticeship vacancies system is to change, its future shape needs to reflect the potential for linking effectively with the Common Applications Process.

Currently the Apprenticeship vacancies system is running in parallel to several local Connexions vacancies site, causing duplication of effort across the two organisations, and also for learners searching for vacancies. However, Connexions representatives assert that they have greater knowledge of local opportunities than NAS and have more vacancies available. They further report that they require their own systems to provide them with data on progress of learners to track information for NEET targets, which is currently not available from the Apprenticeship vacancies system in every region. Further work is therefore required to ensure that information is shared between Connexions and NAS, and that the Apprenticeship vacancies system can evolve to better meet Connexions' needs, reducing their perceptions of the need for separate local sites.

Clearly, data protection and security is an issue that needs to be addressed when considering options for data sharing across systems. This needs to be addressed from the outset, so that terms and conditions can be aligned with the data sharing needs of various stakeholders and systems.

**Recommendation 5:** Consider whether integration with other platforms would be a more cost-effective and simple solution for ongoing recruitment systems for Apprenticeships. As a minimum, ensure that parallel systems (such as Jobcentre Plus and Connexions recruitment sites, and Common Applications Process site) are compatible and data is effectively shared between them; certainly, where possible, the need for duplicating data entry should be kept to a minimum.

### Improvements to the current system

The recommendations above refer to the strategic direction and development of the Apprenticeship vacancies system. In the meantime, the current system can be significantly improved, and barriers to its usage lowered, by altering its processes and functionality.

Currently the process from employer enquiry to advertising a vacancy takes too long. There are a number of stages involved, potentially including: enquiry to Helpline and response to enquiry; follow up by Employer Services; being matched to a learning provider of choice on the Apprenticeship vacancies system by NAS; sharing information with the provider regarding the vacancy; and uploading the information onto the Apprenticeship vacancies system. The number of stages is compounded by delays at certain points for some employers. This process should be reviewed to see whether each stage is necessary or whether some can be bypassed, and to ensure that Service Level Agreements regarding response times are being adhered to.

**Recommendation 6:** Review the current customer journey for employers using the system to identify incremental changes which could reduce or combine low-value-add stages, improve completion times, and raise responsiveness.

In addition, there are a number of outstanding functional improvements that would make the Apprenticeship vacancies system more usable for providers in their work with employers. These include:

- > Improving the application form so that it collects all the information providers and employers require for further screening, so that learners are not asked for a CV in addition.
- > Make it easier to transfer data between the Apprenticeship vacancies system and provider/employer's own systems e.g. add functionality to extract information from application forms electronically.
- > Work with SSCs to ensure the functionality of the system (such as industry classifications and search terms) is suitable for industries within their footprint.

Learners require providers to be more responsive in communicating the progress of their applications. In addition to the applications ladder, providers should be encouraged to communicate with learners using the contact details provided (email and phone) to share more information about the progress of their application e.g. when it is being reviewed, when the learner has progressed to further stages such as interview, whether the application date has been extended or explain any delays to the recruitment process.

**Recommendation 7:** Continue to review functionality with providers, learners and stakeholders including Sector Skills Councils following the changes for Release 4, and implement further functional changes, focused on improving their experience. Focus especially on improving application data collection to reduce the need for additional CVs, improving communication with external provider and employer systems, and improving sector-specific functionality (e.g. search categorisation and key words).

Our review of e-recruitment practice for disabled users outlines a number of good practices in employers' recruitment of disabled candidates, which should be encouraged on the Apprenticeship vacancies system. This may require some changes to functionality to facilitate these practices. This includes allowing space for logos and explanations of well-established inclusion schemes such as Jobcentre Plus' Disability Symbol, for instance allowing the 'Two Ticks' symbol to be displayed in the vacancy advert or short description. We also recommend that employers have access to necessary monitoring information on candidates, on the proviso that learners are clearly made aware of how this information will be used and that this is kept separate from the interviewing process.

**Recommendation 8:** Review the potential for functional changes to the system needed to facilitate positive practice in e-recruitment of disabled users, including for example the display of commitment to the Jobcentre Plus Disability Symbol.

## Appendix 1 | Data from Apprenticeship vacancies system MI and web-trends reports



Figure 29: New candidate registrations and new employers with vacancies each month. Source: Apprenticeship vacancies activity summary report (January 2009- January 2010)

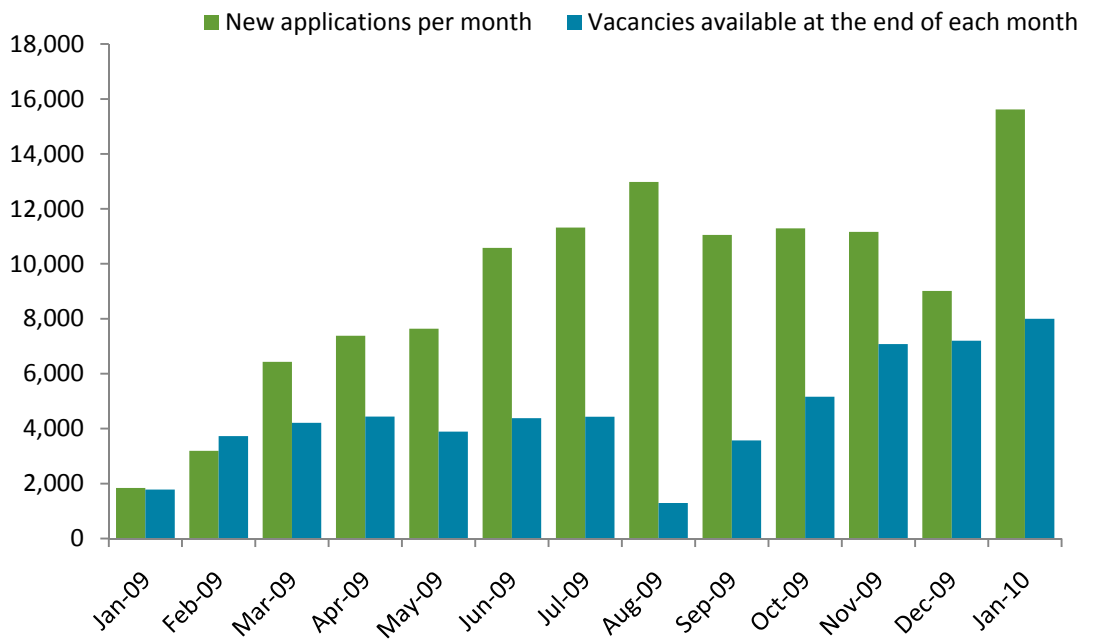


Figure 30: Number of vacancies available each month and the number of new applications each month. Source: Apprenticeship vacancies activity summary report (January 2009- January 2010)

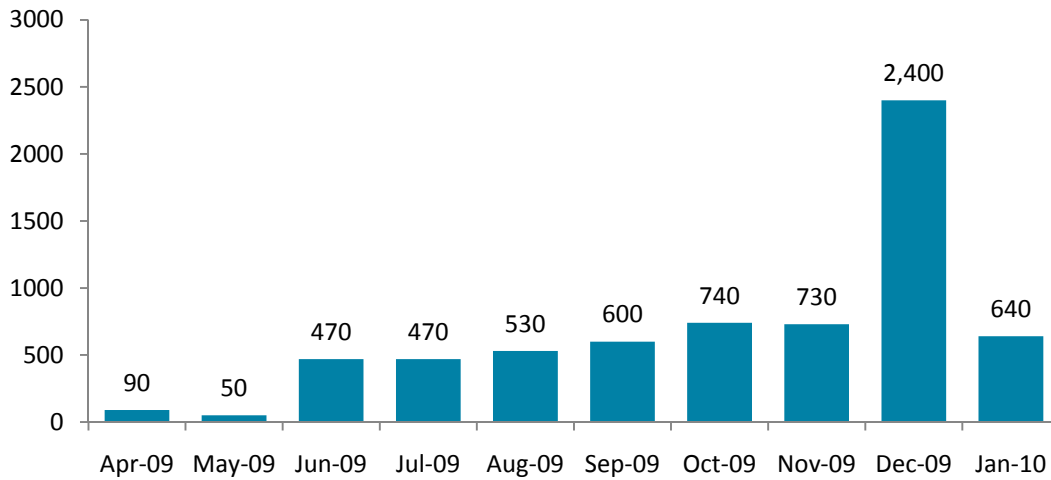


Figure 31: The number of successful matches made each month within the Apprenticeship vacancies system. Source: Apprenticeship vacancies activity summary report (April 2009- January 2010)

April 2009	September 2009	January 2010
1. Public services	1. Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	1. Business, Administration and Law
2. Automotive Industry and Passenger Transport	2. Retail and Commercial Enterprise	2. Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies
3. Administration and Human Resources	3. Health, Public Service and Care	3. Information and Communication Technologies
4. Engineering, Electricians and Building Services	4. Business, Administration and Law	4. Retail and commercial Enterprise
5. Customer Service and Retail	5. Information and Communication Technologies	5. Construction, Planning and the Built Environment

Figure 32: Top five sectors with vacancies. Source: Headlines from Summary Activity Reports (March 2009- January 2010)

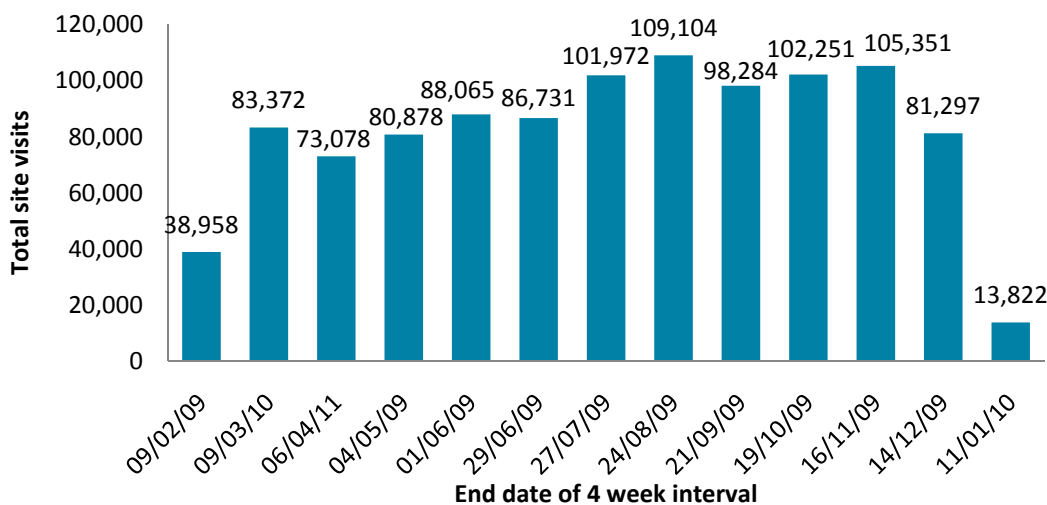


Figure 33: Total visits to Apprenticeship vacancies webpage over 4 weekly intervals (January 2009 - January 2010)

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**CFE (Head Office)**  
Phoenix Yard  
Upper Brown Street  
Leicester LE1 5TE

**CFE**  
Medius House  
2 Sheraton Street  
London W1F 8BH

T 0116 229 3300  
[Info@cfe.org.uk](mailto:Info@cfe.org.uk)  
[www.cfe.org.uk](http://www.cfe.org.uk)