**An Investigation into Apprenticeship Completion and Retention in Northern Ireland: A Social Exchange Perspective.**

**Authors:**

Ian Smyth\* - i.smyth@ulster.ac.uk, Chilemwa Zimba - Zimba-C@email.ulster.ac.uk

Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing

Ulster University Business School  
Shore Road  
Newtownabbey  
Co. Antrim  
BT37 0QB

\*Corresponding author

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**Introduction**

There has been much effort at Government level aimed at increasing the availability of apprenticeships. Previously such work has focused both on increasing the numbers of apprenticeships available and the numbers of young people applying for these positions (and, recently, an emphasis on widening the age range of apprenticeship applicants). However, there is a growing recognition that strategies focused on increasing the supply of posts and applicants can only form part of attempts to increase apprenticeships: retention and completion have to form part of any overarching strategy. For this reason, research into apprentice retention and completion is becoming an increasingly important area of debate and research. This study was designed to contribute to this debate.

This paper starts by providing a review of what is known about the factors that affect apprenticeship completions in the UK and more widely before moving on to examine the situation in an engineering apprenticeship program within the Northern Ireland context. It then describes an exploratory, qualitative study designed to collect data on the factors that influence the intentions of apprentices in Northern Ireland to continue or discontinue their apprenticeship and/or their intentions to stay with or leave their employer after completion. Primary, qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews with managers and focus groups with current and completed apprentices. The study used social exchange theory as its basis and focused on the costs and benefits to the apprentice and employer of maintaining a) the training and b) the employment relationship. The paper concludes by suggesting strategies that might contribute to efforts to improving retention and completion rates amongst apprentices in Northern Ireland.

**Background**

The UK Government has increased its efforts in recent years to boost employer investment in apprenticeships. In 2016 BIS and DfE in the UK announced a target of having three million apprenticeships in place by 2020 (BIS and DfE, 2016). In May that year Lord Sugar was appointed as Governments’ Enterprise Tsar to increase awareness of apprenticeships. In April 2017 the introduction of an apprenticeship levy (to be levied on all organisations with a pay bill of more than £3 million) was announced. Perhaps predictably, this has received resistance from employers and regions within the UK; in addition, some industry organisations (e.g. the Institute of Directors) have questioned the effectiveness of the measure in meeting the intended aim of training more apprentices (BBC, 2018). Nonetheless, many organisations, particularly in manufacturing, remain committed to apprenticeships, as it is a key area for recruiting and developing engineers (CEBR, 2015; Geldman, 2015; ISB, 2015; Rankin, 2008).

Specific efforts have been necessitated in some sectors by the reduced number of young people in pursuit of careers in the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) areas. The limited supply of people with skills in STEM entering the labour market means that effective strategies are needed in this sector to help ensure that apprentices who are recruited in these areas complete their training and are retained by the organisations that invest in their development.

In line with work conducted elsewhere in the UK, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland has similarly made concerted efforts to increase the number of young people enrolling in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in order to help grow a dynamic and innovative workforce that can boost UK’s productive capacity (DEL, 2014).

Apprenticeships are seen as providing significant value to organisations in that they are claimed to widen the talent pool, increase organisational profit and productivity and reduce costs of recruiting experienced personnel (CIPD, 2014; Smith et al., 2005b). However, a large number of apprentices drop out during their training period. DEL (2016) reported that in Northern Ireland, of the 57,014 apprentices who were recruited between 2007 and October 2015, some 40% of the 49,158 who left the programme did so without completing their frameworks (ie, less than two thirds of those who left had completed their apprenticeship; the remaining 7856 were still on the programme but yet to complete).

Non-completion of apprenticeships depletes resources by not providing a worthwhile return on investment in skills development and has long term adverse impacts on national and organisational productivity (Aylin and Webber, 2000; Backes-Gellner et al., 2010; Gambin and Hogarth, 2015). Employers are also faced with the risk of losing their investment to competitors if apprentices leave the organisation after completion, with the tangible costs of replacing employees including the costs of recruitment, selection and wages, whilst intangible costs include reduced production from inexperienced recruits, production errors and supervisory costs of coaching (Aylin and Webber, 2000; Hillmer et al., 2004). Hogarth et al (2012) have estimated that a total of three years and seven months’ employment post-completion is needed in order for employers to fully recoup the costs of training apprentices in engineering frameworks.

Early on, the need to understand the reasons for apprentice drop-out was recognised along with the need to develop effective retention strategies. Bilginsoy (2003) recommended that further research needed to be conducted to explore post apprenticeship experiences, while Jamrog (2004, p. 33) predicted that “if effective retention strategies were not developed, employers could face severe retention problems in the next twenty years, resulting from the tendency of generations born after the baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) to change jobs”.

Given that most current apprentices have been recruited from ‘Generation Y’ (born in the 1990s) the need to develop effective strategies to encourage apprentices not only to complete their training, but to remain with the organisations that trained them for a longer timeframe is becoming more urgent, if both government and employers are to reap the full benefits of their investment.

The research reported here was therefore significant and timely as it attempted to investigate the strategies that are effective in retaining apprentices within the Northern Ireland context. The aim of this study, then, was to investigate strategies that can enhance the completion rates of apprentices and their retention after their training within the Northern Irish context. This provides a useful context for exploration given that Northern Ireland often falls behind its mainland UK counterparts (NIRC, 2018).

***Apprentice completion rates and factors affecting completion***

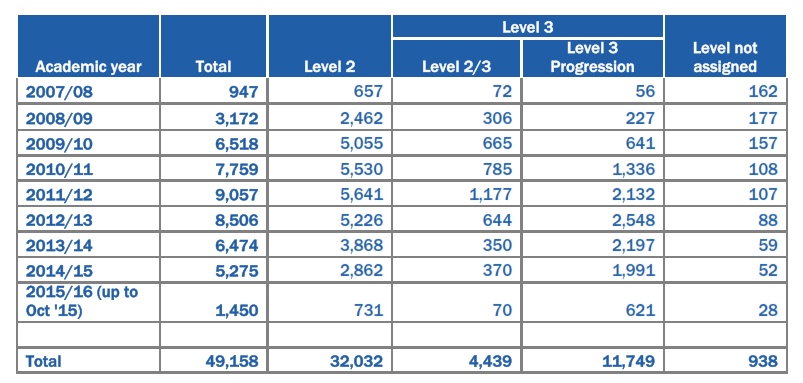
Gospel (1998, p. 438) defined apprenticeships as:

*A method of employment and on-the-job training which involves a set of reciprocal rights and duties between an employer and a trainee. The employer agrees to teach a range of skills, in return the apprentice agrees to work for an extended period at a training wage which is low compared to the qualified workers rate but which increases periodically as the apprenticeship nears completion.*

This definition summarises what is involved in apprenticeships by highlighting that it is employment and that the apprentice is trained on-the-job (ONTJ) and paid an apprentice wage. In addition, apprentices are also trained off-the-job (OFFTJ) and gain a qualification upon completion (CIPD, 2014a).

There has been a decrease in the completion numbers of apprentices in Northern Ireland from a high in 2011/12 to 2015/2016 as revealed in Table 1. Out of the 49,158 leavers, 40 percent did not achieve their targeted framework (DEL, 2016). This constitutes a significant drain on the Government’s as well as employers’ resources (Gambin and Hogarth, 2015). Therefore, research in this area is required to establish the factors underlying low completion rates of apprenticeships. In contrast, England experiences apprenticeship completion rates of 90 percent, although it is noted this higher completion rate may be in part attributable to older apprentices being recruited by larger organisations (BIS, 2013). In Northern Ireland, adult apprenticeships have been restricted to the priority economic sectors needed to rebalance the economy (Apprenticeships NI, 2017) which might go some way towards explaining any difference in age profile of starters – just 16.4% of starters in NI were 25+ in 2015 compared to 41% in England. Caution should be taken in making any direct comparison with regards to completion on the grounds of age; despite this completion figures remain a significant issue.

Table 1: Completion rates for apprentices (Source: ApprenticeshipsNI Statistical Bulletin, DEL, (2016) p. 25)



The BIS report further revealed that completion rates were lower in Apprenticeships in Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (AEMT). This may be because they have a longer duration and are mostly taken up by young people who have a higher propensity to drop out than older apprentices. In contrast, other UK studies revealed that completion rates were higher in Engineering frameworks (Ball and John, 2005; Snell and Hart, 2008). Engineering frameworks account for a greater proportion of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland (10%) than in England and Wales (6%) (NIDirect, 2017; DoE, 2017), however, direct comparison between the two should be taken with a note of caution given how the apprenticeships are classified, which makes extrapolating information more difficult[[1]](#footnote-1). Additionally, the notion of partial completion presents a further complication in that the vocational nature of an apprenticeship may instil a useful skillset in the apprentice that is of benefit to the organisation, yet is not captured by national statistics. This was suggested by Foyster et al. (2000) in an Australian vocational training study, who argued that the true skillset of the wider workforce is much higher than the levels suggested by qualification and completion data alone.

The relative costs and benefits as perceived by apprentices is one issue believed to affect the likelihood of trainees completing their apprenticeships. Bilginsoy (2003) suggested that if the expected benefits to an apprentice of continuing are lower than the ‘cost’ of training (where cost might be, for instance, a lower wage in the short term compared to that obtained by their friends), then they would be more likely to quit their apprenticeship. Additionally, Malcomson et al (2003) asserted that apprentices in their final years can more readily perceive the benefits of completion than new recruits and hence are less likely to quit. At this stage, they are identified as being more personally invested in the program and the study revealed the benefit of an agreed higher rate if retained after the end of the apprenticeship.

Table 2 is based on research by BIS (2013) and shows the factors that influence English apprentice completion rates and their retention after completing their training. Non-completion of apprenticeships has been attributed to a number of factors. Some apprentices discontinue their apprenticeship as a result of being offered alternative employment, which might offer better prospects or higher wages than their current employer (BIS, 2013). Low apprentice wages have been cited as having a significant impact on completion rates of apprentices (Snell and Hart, 2008). This may be attributed to the apprentice rate being the lowest in the schedule of the national minimum wage rates. While a review by Oliver (2010) in Australia found that there was no consistent evidence that low wages of apprenticeships had a negative impact on completion rates, a year later Elston and James (2011) did conclude that English completion rates were higher where apprentices were paid higher than the recommended rates.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Factors influencing completion rates of apprentices** | **Factors influencing retention of apprentices after completion** |
| * Alternative employment * Apprentice wages * Supervisor relationships * Quality of on-the-job training * Quality of off-the-job training * Feeling inferior to other  employees | * Post apprenticeship pay * Interesting work * challenging tasks * Career progression * Training and development * Supervisor relationships * Geographical location * Job security * Workload |

Table 2: Factors influencing the completion of apprenticeships and their retention in the organisation after training (BIS, 2013)

Unhealthy supervisor-apprentice relationships can contribute to non-completion of apprenticeships (Gow et al., 2008a; Smith et al., 2005a). Snell and Hart (2008) also revealed that apprentices who were not satisfied with the quality of on-the-job training (ONTJT) were more likely to have the intention of leaving an apprenticeship. This was because those apprentices who were not satisfied with on-the-job training quality often perceived the training component to be non-existent. Additionally a number of studies based in Australia and other countries found that apart from ONTJT, the quality (or perceived lack of quality) of off-the-job training (OFFTJT) also influenced intentions to continue or discontinue an apprenticeship; perceived (ir)relevance of the training and the teaching style of the trainers were particularly likely to be mentioned (Smith et al., 2005a; Snell and Hart, 2008). Furthermore, apprentices’ perception that they were viewed as being inferior to other workers could also cause them to quit their training (Latukha, 2011; Snell and Hart, 2008).

However, the drawing of conclusions regarding the reasons for non-completion of trainee programmes requires some caution, as they are often context specific (Harris et al., 2001; Latukha, 2011; Smith et al., 2005a). The challenges faced by first year apprentices may differ from those in later years and indeed apprenticeships in specific settings can be affected by issues defined by context year on year also. Therefore, this research sought to investigate factors that were applicable to engineering apprenticeship participants within the Northern Irish context and, as such, an understanding of such reasons may be vital in informing their retention strategies. Factors affecting retention rates are reviewed in the next section.

***Factors influencing retention of apprentices***

Apprentices are regarded as employees and therefore enjoy similar rights and benefits as other employees (CIPD, 2014a). Employee retention presents one of the most challenging tasks for human resource (HR) professionals and management (Jamrog, 2004; Latukha, 2011). For the purpose of this research apprentice retention was considered in the context of the factors that influence apprentices’ decisions to stay with or leave their employer after completing their training. Research commissioned by BIS and conducted by Colahan and Johnson (2013) revealed that while most apprentices may not leave their employer immediately after completing their apprenticeship, they may do so at a later stage for a higher paying job, to pursue a higher level of training or to pursue alternative employment outside of the company. Moreover, Higton et al (2014) revealed that 75 percent of apprentices only planned to stay with their employers for two to three years after completing their apprenticeship training. The study however, did not provide reasons for such intentions. The current research therefore sought to investigate this area further to establish the rationale for apprentices’ decisions to stay with the employer for only a short time after completing training.

Employers’ human resource investment strategy can also influence apprentice retention. A report from the Centre for Economics and Business Research (2015) revealed that 68 percent of UK employers of AEMT retained all apprentices that completed their apprenticeship training, while noting that a significant minority (22 percent) did not retain any and nine percent retained ‘some’ (1 percent did not know). An earlier study by Backes-Gellner et al (2010) had found that nearly 45 percent of employers with an investment strategy retained most of the apprentices they trained. Conversely, almost 20 percent of employers in the study were identified as using a substitution strategy (where apprentices are hired as a cheap substitute for unskilled or semi-skilled workers and are therefore not retained after completing their training) and found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that these companies did not retain their apprentices. This study was based in Germany and across firms of varying sizes and industry types using retention rate as an indicator of substitution strategy; it did not fully address type of training or training motivation. Nonetheless, the use of a substitution strategy by a company means that an apprentice is not guaranteed a job upon completion of their training; subsequent concerns over the lack of job security might in fact itself be a motivation for apprentices to leave – ie ‘to jump before they are pushed’. It should also be noted that the apprentices themselves are equally not obliged to remain with their employer after completing their training, as the apprenticeship agreement only lasts for the duration of the programme; this too may be a significant contribution to the turnover figures observed.

As Table 2 illustrated, a number of factors can influence intentions to stay with or leave an employer after completion. Hogarth et al (2012) suggested that in engineering apprenticeships, there was a minimal difference between the wages during and after completing training. This could negatively impact on retention rates: as Taylor and Poyner (2008) pointed out, to retain employees in the manufacturing sector where there is a limited supply in the labour market, they needed to be offered competitive wages. Competitors may be able to offer apprentices higher wages after completion than their current employers (possibly, of course, because the competitors have not spent money investing in skills development), which may persuade the newly-qualified apprentice to leave. However, Boxall et al (2003) revealed that pay was typically not the most important retention factor, but, rather, was viewed by apprentices in combination with other factors such as interesting work. The presence of interesting work may pull employees to remain in their current employment whereas the absence of it may push them to seek alternative employment. Related to interesting work, the provision of challenging tasks to apprentices may help persuade them to stay on with the organisation after completion too (Latukha, 2011).

Alongside the presence or absence of a human capital investment strategy the structure of the organization can also influence decisions about whether to stay or leave. Ball (1997) suggested that lack of career progression in modern organisations that have flat organisational structures can place challenges on retaining employees. He therefore advocated that employers should seek alternative means of encouraging staff to stay with the organization, such as further opportunities for training and development, along with the broadening of their role and responsibilities. Continuing development after conclusions of an apprenticeship can stimulate employees to stay on with an organisation, as they feel that they are developing their skills (Renaud et al., 2015).

Such factors are of particular relevance to younger employees who may not be motivated as much by monetary rewards as were previous generations (see, for example, Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010) and may instead seek more meaningful roles with greater long-term potential. Other subsidiary factors influencing intentions to stay include geographical proximity of an organisation (Latukha, 2011); positive perceptions of job security (Yamamoto, 2013; Zeytinoglu et al., 2012); and positive relationships with supervisors and co-workers (Boxall et al., 2003; Gow et al., 2008a). Conversely, excessive workload can influence employees to seek alternative employment (Gibbons, 2000).

Cho and Lewis (2012) reported that employees who had worked for a minimum of eight years, (and hence are relatively settled with their employer) were less likely to leave compared to younger employees who are relatively new in an organization. Cho and Lewis (ibid) and Ito et al, (2013) have also suggested that the reason why younger employees are more likely to leave than older ones is because they are still at an exploratory stage of their careers (conversely, those who have remained might be more likely to have found a job that satisfies their needs). Whilst it would of course be illegal to specifically seek older applicants *per se*, this does suggest that employers might benefit from emphasising different aspects of a remuneration and reward package to different target groups. Since most apprentices under consideration in this study are from this younger age group, they potentially can provide useful evidence to help develop more effective strategies to help with the retention of younger recruits.

Factors affecting retention of apprentices can also be viewed from the employers’ perspective. Malcomson et al (2003) suggested that firms primarily seek to retain ‘good’ workers, who can positively contribute to the productivity of the organisation after completing their training. He further suggested that when an organisation retains a trainee, their competitors will consider such a worker to be ‘top talent’ and hence may offer him/her higher wages in order to lure them away from their current employer. Therefore the firms’ ability to retain that apprentice will be dependent on whether they are able to offer a higher wage than the competitors. However, this is only one of many factors, and as with completion rates, retention rates may also be organisation- and context-specific and must therefore be viewed within the totality of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors.

**Social Exchange Theory**

Previous research on apprenticeships has emphasised motivation theory in explaining the factors influencing apprentices’ retention decisions (Gow et al., 2008a; Gow et al., 2008b). This research sought to adopt a more balanced approach based on Social Exchange Theory (SET) that brings together the two parties to the employment relationship, the employer and employee, and how their social exchange interactions foster levels of retention. Social exchange theory as proposed by Blau (1964), is subdivided into Perceived Organisational Support and Leader Member Exchange). Perceived Organisational Support entails the exchange relationship between an employee and their organisation (Ko and Hur, 2014; Wayne et al., 2002). Alternatively, Leader Member Exchange refers to the quality of the relationship between an employee and their supervisor (Ko and Hur, 2014; Wayne et al., 2002). Studies reveal that positive perceived organisational support enhances employees’ commitment to the organisation and reduces intentions to seek alternative employment (Ahmed et al., 2013; Alfes et al., 2013; Dawley et al., 2010; Loi et al., 2006; Wayne et al., 1997). In addition, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Wayne et al (ibid) suggested that employees who are trained and promoted may perceive higher levels of organisational support than employees who are not. Therefore when employers invest in and recognise the efforts of their employees, the result would be strong employer employee social exchange relationships (Wayne et al., ibid).

Social exchange theory suggests that the individual who provides rewards to another obligates the recipient in turn to supply benefits to the provider. This perspective originated from Gouldner’s (1960) idea of ‘reciprocation’: that the primary mechanism for social interaction and group structure is that for a recipient to continue to receive benefits, they need to reciprocate those benefits. More recent thoughts on social exchange theory propose that an employer who initiates voluntary actions by treating its employees positively can expect them to reciprocate such treatment (Gould-Williams and Davies, 2005; Ko and Hur, 2014). Employees’ perceptions of fair and equal treatment from an employer will result in reciprocating that positive treatment with positive work behaviours (Gould-Williams and Davies, 2005; Ko and Hur, 2014; Parzefall and Salin, 2010). Conversely, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) suggested that an employer may reciprocate the positive work attitudes, behaviour, loyalty, reduced absenteeism and reduced turnover of employees by providing higher benefits, improved conditions of service and enhanced respect and trust for them. Together, these actions foster a social exchange relationship between the employer and employee in which both parties are mutually rewarded. In contrast, an employers’ negative treatment of employees may be reciprocated with negative work attitudes and behaviours (Parzefall and Salin, 2010; Shoss et al., 2013). Therefore, high turnover may be a consequence of a negative relationship between an employer and an employee, forcing the latter to embark on an escape strategy by seeking alternative employment (Avanzi et al., 2014). Therefore, in the context of this research, positive attitudes of the employer may influence apprentices to reciprocate through higher completion and retention rates.

Additionally, social exchange theory suggests that the real value of an employment relationship is determined by comparing the costs of the relationship with the benefits (Blau, 1964; Aylott, 2014). Therefore, an employer may take into account the costs and benefits of the apprenticeship to the organisation in deciding on whether to retain or lose an apprentice. Thus, if the benefits derived from the apprenticeship exceed the cost of training the apprentice, the employer may retain them after completion; if the costs exceed the benefits, the employer may let them go. Similarly, an apprentice’s decision to remain with or leave an employer might take into account the costs and benefits of remaining with that employer: if the rewards such as pay and benefits are higher in alternative employment, they may leave their employer (Boxall et al., 2003; Cho and Lewis, 2012).

Social exchange theory also offers a foundation for appreciating the role that employers play in fostering employee commitment (Blau, 1964; Ko and Hur, 2014; Parzefall and Salin, 2010). Dawley et al (2010) proposed that the continuance of a relationship is dependent on the value attached to that relationship by the parties involved in it. In this regard, the investment that an employee makes in the employment relationship enhances his/her commitment to the organisation and would disadvantage him/her to leave their employer for an alternative employer. This cultivates trust between the employee and employer, that neither party will evade the obligations (Blau, 1964; Becker, 1960; Schelling, 1960).

It is not just tangible aspects such as wages or promotion prospects that are relevant here: employer support arrangements such as mentoring for employees can also act as a stimulant to favourable social exchange relationships between employers and employees (Dawley et al., 2010). Mentoring relationships can be an effective means of retaining them in an organisation (CIPD, 2014a; Du Plessis and Corney, 2011; Du Plessis et al., 2012). For this reason, within Social Exchange Theory, leader member exchange is construed as being of vital importance to the retention of apprentices, as relationships with supervisors has been cited as a key factor affecting their completion and retention rates. Therefore, this suggests that the retention of high performers requires healthy relationships between supervisors and subordinates (Biron and Boon, 2013).

In line with this, studies have also indicated that leader member exchange is a significant predictor of turnover intention (Ahmed et al., 2013; Dawley et al., 2010). Furthermore, unhealthy leader member exchange may negatively impact on perceived organisational support (Wayne et al., 1997), possibly because negative leader member exchange can have a spill over effect on perceived organisational support. Perversely, though, Harris et al (2005) has suggested that employees who have benefited from a positive leader member exchange may be pulled away from their employers because the enhanced skills and competences gained through interactions with supportive supervisors render them particularly attractive to alternative employers. Alternatively, though, more recently Kim et al (2013) have argued that high leader member exchange reduces employee intentions to leave the employer due to the higher emotional attachment to their supervisors generated.

This research therefore used the above theoretical framework to develop an understanding of retention practices and the extent to which the combination of push and pull factors (Bretz et al, 1994) influence an employees’ intention to stay with or leave their employer. The interview and focus group guides were therefore designed to capture these aspects of social exchange theory.

**Research Approach**

This study adopted an interpretive, qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. The approach was chosen as it seeks to derive meaning from people’s experiences (Saunders and Lewis, 2012). This was important in this research as participants were asked to share experiences of their apprenticeship in order to gain deeper insights into the factors that were influencing their intentions to continue or discontinue the apprenticeship and/or to stay with or leave their employer after completion.

This approach was also chosen in view of the relatively small size of the population (N=58), consisting of 35 completed apprentices and 23 current apprentices from a Northern Irish engineering apprenticeship scheme. The completed apprentices included those who were enrolled from 1997 to 2011. No apprentices in their first year (eight) were included in the study, because their training in the first year was purely off-the-job, which made it difficult to access them.

Given the relatively small sample size a quantitative, survey-based approach was not considered feasible because it would have been unlikely to provide a suitable sample from which to make statistical inferences: a review of 490 questionnaire-based studies by Baruch and Holtom (2008) revealed that typically, a response rate of just 53 percent may be expected. Of more importance though, a qualitative approach was considered essential for this study, in view of the aim, which was to explore the factors that can influence the completion rates of apprentices and their retention after completion. Previous research on completion and retention rates has also adopted a similar approach (Harris et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2005a; Snell and Hart, 2008). It also allows rich data to be gathered, providing thick descriptions that are built in real life context, thereby explaining phenomenon in greater detail than in quantitative research (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Miles, 2014).

Primary data for the research was obtained through semi-structured interviews with three managers and facilitation of four focus groups, two with current and the other two with completed apprentices. Focus group one (F1) and focus group four (F4) comprised of completed apprentices (n=5 and 6 respectively), focus group two (F2) comprised of current fourth year apprentices (n=6) and focus group three (F3) of current second year apprentices (n=6). The total focus group participation=23, allowed for a varied perspective across different stages of the program. The rationale for separating the two sets of employees was to encourage a more focussed study by grouping participants with similar characteristics and within the same employment level, to enable them freely express their opinions, as recommended by Baker (1999) and to enable comparison of views between those with greater and lesser investment in the programme.

Separate discussion guides were used for the interviews and focus groups respectively, although both focussed on similar issues. The guides were developed based on materials used in previous research on this topic (Elston and James, 2011; Fields, 2002; Harris et al., 2001; Wang, 2012) and then piloted to check for clarity of questioning, and allowing for minor adjustments to be made to the data collection instruments to improve clarity prior to use. As advocated by Shenton (2004), an iterative questioning strategy was adopted, with member checks[[2]](#footnote-2) to ensure credibility of the information gathered.

All participants for the interviews and focus groups were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique widely used in exploratory research (Neuman, 2014). All the interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, with prior permission from the participants, and subsequently coded using nVivo software package. This ensured the capturing of the full content of the participants experiences and perceptions, thereby necessitating a more robust analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved a process of sorting and sifting through the materials to find related phrases, connections between variables, patterns and common sequences. The compiled data was then compared with previous literature to check for similarities and inconsistencies with previous research (Miles, 2014).

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Note that the findings from the interviews with managers, focus group participants and organisational reports revealed that the respective organisations had experienced low drop-out rates during the apprenticeship in recent years, from 2011 to 2015.

**Costs and benefits of the apprenticeship**

From the perspective of the employer, the costs of training an apprentice included wages, tuition, additional in-house training, time spent on and in supervision, attending classes at the college and compiling their National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) portfolios during company hours. Employers estimated that these costs amounted to approximately £15,000 to £20,000 per year. Despite these numerous costs, apprenticeships are deemed to be beneficial for the organisations in that they help the employer address their skills gaps and enable them to grow their own engineers.

One Manager noted:

…growing them from the start, they can progress to become the engineers, the managers of the future (Line manager 1)

All the managers interviewed indicated that the benefits of the apprenticeship exceeded the costs. The only costs incurred by focus group participants were the loss of summer holidays (that they were used to in high school and would be likely to have had if they had chosen instead to go to university), travelling costs (cited by few as most lived within the vicinity of the company) and the time spent in off-the-job and on-the-job training (again cited by only a few). All the focus group participants stated that the benefits of apprenticeships exceeded the costs, since the employer met all the costs of training. Benefits were perceived in terms of the high value of the qualifications after completion, experience obtained and learning while getting paid. This largely impacted positively on their intentions to complete the apprenticeship.

Although organisations’ skills requirements were forecast in manpower plans to ensure availability of positions for apprentices upon completion, employment after the apprenticeship was nonetheless not guaranteed. One of the managers noted that “even though we have plans in place…we could not say that we will definitely keep them on” (Line manager 2). However, it was only in rare circumstances that some apprentices might not be offered employment upon completion, as elaborated by another manager:

…You really have to be bad [in other words] not going to college, not going for work, when you are in work you are not doing your job, if you’re standing talking to somebody all day. You really have to misbehave to get to the point where they’ll say ‘away you go’. (Line manager 3)

An examination of the factors influencing intentions to continue or leave an apprenticeship from the perspective of the apprentices and completed apprentices is reported in the next section.

**Intentions to continue or discontinue the apprenticeship**

Key findings were considered to be those points that emerged from two or more focus groups.

A number of factors were identified as influencing apprentices’ thoughts regarding completing or discontinuing an apprenticeship, as summarised in Table 3. For clarity, each focus group/interview has been labelled in Table 3 below as follows – F1 = Focus group 1, IM1 – Interview with Manager 1 etc. Where a theme emerged, it has been shaded blue against where it was found in the data.

Table 3: Factors influencing intentions to complete/ discontinue an apprenticeship and to stay/leave their organisation after completion

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Sub-theme** | **2nd year** | **4th year** | **Completed Apprentices** | | **Line Managers** | | |
|  |  | **F3** | **F2** | **F1** | **F4** | **IM1** | **IM2** | **IM3** |
| Intentions to complete an apprenticeship |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Intentions to discontinue an apprenticeship |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Factors influencing intentions to stay or leave an apprenticeship:** | | | | | | | | |
| ***Perceived Organisation Support*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Employer Support | Supportive |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not supportive |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Quailty of on-the-job training: |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Recognition | Recognised |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not recognised |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Relevance of off-the-job training | Relevant |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not relevant |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Apprentice Pay | Happy with |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not happy with |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***Leader Member Exchange*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Support from supervisors | Supportive |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not supportive |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Favouritism |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Support from trainers | Supportive |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not supportive |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Factors influencing intentions to stay or leave an organisation:** | | | | | | | | |
| ***Personal factors*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Distance from home |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Experience |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***Perceived Organisation Support*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Post apprenticeship pay | Happy with |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not happy with |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Career progression |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Challenging and interesting work |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Workload |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Work environment |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Job security |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Additional training | Provided with |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Not provided with |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***Leader member exchange*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Impact of support from supervisors | Positive |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Negative |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Table 3 reveals that the most-frequently-cited factors when determining whether to continue with an apprenticeship, emerging in at least three of the focus groups, were: employer support; lack of recognition; relevance of training; apprentice pay; support from supervisors and; support from trainers. In terms of factors influencing intention to stay or with or leave an organisation, the emerging factors were: distance from home; dissatisfaction with post-apprenticeship pay; career progression; challenging/interesting work; workload; and job security

Furthermore, inspection of the manager interviews reveals that only four of the factors identified by apprentices as being important were recognized as such by two of the three managers: apprentice pay; career progressions and; additional training. Of these, only one – employer support – was viewed as important by all three managers.

The themes identified from the focus groups with current and completed apprentices as impacting on intentions towards continuing or discontinuing an apprenticeship are described in more detail below. It is worth noting that there are differences in perception between managers and apprentices which strengthens the argument for the need to understand influencing factors more fully from both perspectives.

The results reported below are shown categorised under the two main component parts of social exchange theory (perceived organisational support and leader member exchange), as shown in Table 3.

**Perceived Organisational Support**

In the part of the study relating to apprenticeship completion rates, Perceived organisational support was viewed in terms of all the forms of support offered to apprentices by the organisation during the course of their training. This comprised five areas, namely: employer support, quality of on-the-job training (ONTJT), recognition, apprentice pay and relevance of off-the-job training (OFFTJT).

***Employer Support***

Employer support was the one factor which all three managers and a majority of apprentices agreed. Note that only apprentices from the current (fourth) year failed to cite this as a factor (but conversely, did raise the issue of ‘non-supportive’ employers[[3]](#footnote-3)).

Most of the completed apprentices believed that they had received high levels of support from their employer during their apprenticeship: for example, they were given time on a Friday afternoon to compile their NVQs (the underpinning qualification) during company hours. This positively impacted on their intentions to complete the apprenticeship. Despite such initiatives continuing into the present day, some current apprentices nonetheless did report a lack of support from management; this ranged from issues such as lack of support in liaising with tutors over taught content through to lack of recognition. These issues influenced their thoughts regarding discontinuing the apprenticeship. They also seemed reluctant to approach their employer for assistance with challenges faced in their apprenticeship, as they felt that nothing could be done to help them; for example, one participant stated:

Any issues I’ve ever had with this place, the technology and stuff, it never seems like anyone would try to do anything to help me... (Year 4 Apprentice)

This appeared to be more of a factor with current apprentices. Completed apprentices tended, in retrospect, to recognise the efforts that had been made by the employer to provide support during the apprenticeship, whilst within the current apprentice cohort, there was some recognition too of the efforts made to provide support, albeit alongside a view that the employer could do more overall.

***Quality of on-the-job training.***

This issue was cited by two of the four groups of apprentices: one of the second year and one of the completed apprentice groups. The main concern among these participants was that the on-the-job training lacked structure. It appeared that there was discrepancy between their expectations of on-the-job training and what was actually offered, which led some to consider leaving the apprenticeship. One participant had the following sentiments:

Every day, I just get put on with an engineer and watch them do stuff, instead of it being written out what’s going to happen that day, what *[I’m going]* to learn throughout the course of say, a month or two months, but they don’t do that (Year 2 Apprentice)

One of the managers confirmed that this apprentice’s view was in fact quite accurate:

...what we do is we say “You are going to be with this guy, he’ll tell you whatever job he does...you’re right there with him, you're watching him, you’re asking him questions”...that is on-the-job training, just doing the job (Line Manager 3)

Taken together, these comments suggests that while managers believe that this rather informal approach is satisfactory, apprentices themselves would appreciate a better overview of how their training experiences are intended to be structured, although they concede that the nature of on-the-job training often makes a structured approach difficult to achieve.

***Recognition***

Participants felt that the only way in which any efforts to ‘go the extra mile’ for their organisation were recognised was through being paid overtime. There appeared to be few other ways in which apprentices felt their efforts were recognized or rewarded: most of the completed and current final year participants felt that any other forms of recognition were non-existent. A completed apprentice noted:

...you get extra money for staying but you wouldn’t get a pat on the back, maybe some managers would, but ours wouldn’t (Completed Apprentice)

It is worth noting that none of the managers who were interviewed identified the value of recognition for effort or good work as being a factor influencing apprentice decision-making.

***Relevance of Off-the-job Training***

Although some of the completed apprentices reported that they had felt that the training was relevant, many indicated that they felt that much of the content was not, which may indicate a failure to understand the wider skills benefit of an apprenticeship aimed at the needs of the industry rather than the employer. A participant noted:

...why waste our time doing a two or three hour class once a week, for a year, on something you are never going to do, would it not be better suited to tailor the course to the company? (Year 4 Apprentice)

The participants pointed to the fact that it was easier to understand something that would be useful in their job, that they could see themselves using in that context. Nonetheless, this wasn’t a universally held view – one of the current final year participants did see the benefits of off-the-job training if looking beyond the organisation in which they were currently employed:

…It’s also good to have *[off-the-job training]* as well. If you were to look elsewhere for a maintenance job, the college have qualified you in that too, so you are not stuck to one area. You can also go to further areas, because you are qualified enough through the apprenticeship.

Just one of the managers identified the relevance (or otherwise) of off-the-job training as an issue for apprentices, noting however that it may be more of an issue for deployment in some departments than others.

***Apprentice Pay***

Most of the participants (both currently studying and completed) were paid higher than the recommended rate; unsurprisingly they reported that they were happy with the apprentice pay, and this positively impacted on their intentions to complete the apprenticeship. One current apprentice indicated:

...I had applied for two other apprenticeships...before here and this was the best paying one by a long shot for the first two years (Year 2 Apprentice)

This might point to one of the reasons why these organisations report relatively low apprentice turnover figures. Note that two of the managers also mentioned this topic in their interviews. It also suggests that any increase in pay for apprentices would be likely to have only limited impact on retention in these companies – those that pay less might report otherwise.

**Leader Member Exchange**

In addition to the impact of the ‘perceived organisational support’ factors, leader member exchange factors also impacted on intentions to continue or discontinue an apprenticeship as revealed in the following sections. Leader member exchange in the context of this research related to the relationships that apprentices had with their off-the-job trainers and on-the-job supervisors. The main themes in this category consisted of support from supervisors, perceptions of favouritism and support from trainers.

***Support from supervisors***

Most participants from all focus groups had supportive supervisors, who provided challenging tasks.

....he’ll give you...help if you need it, but he’s not going to tell you everything, just to see whether you can finish it yourself (Completed Apprentice)

However, some participants believed that more support could be provided, or that the amount of support offered was erratic and differed between occasions. The apprentices found this frustrating:

....sometimes if you ask them they’ll show you or get someone to show you but sometimes if he asks you to do something and say you don’t know how to do it, he’ll just say...you are supposed to know (Year 2 Apprentice).

When questioned on the reason for this, it appeared to be due to lack of time on the part of the supervisor. Apprentices appear to have attempted to resolve such situations by seeking advice from other members of staff or by attempting to ‘figure it out’ for themselves. Line managers did not seem to be aware of any such shortcomings in supervisory arrangements.

***Favoritism***

This theme was cited by most current apprenticeship participants, yet was not raised by any of the completed apprentices. There was a general feeling among the current participants that some managers treated certain apprentices more favourably than others. Managers however did not appear to recognise this as an issue.

The managers explained that in their second year, apprentices were rotated around all the departments to ascertain which suited them and which they preferred. However, some of the apprentices did not appear to believe this was the case and felt that they had had no say regarding which department they would be placed in during their rotation, with certain placements being restricted to certain apprentices. For example, one said:

...There’s a lot of favouritism towards certain apprentices. Regardless of how good the apprentice is at their job they wouldn’t get *[the placement]* because the managers have their eyes set on their favourite apprentice (Year 4 Apprentice)

Such perceptions of favouritism and the feeling that they had been overlooked for certain placements had led some apprentices to think about leaving the apprenticeship, although none had actually done so. This does appear in contrast to the previous section which broadly indicated that supervisors were supportive. It also serves to demonstrate the nuanced nature of the supervisor-apprentice relationship in that whilst all focus groups indicated that supervisors were broadly supportive, participants in both of the ‘current apprentice’ focus groups believed that favouritism occurs. This would suggest that whilst support is given to all who need it, this does not negate the possibility of favouritism occurring. Again, this is an issue about which managers appeared unaware, as they did not mention this in their interviews.

***Support from trainers***

Participants from both the completed apprentice focus groups gave positive accounts of the support they had received from trainers, which ranged from making themselves available for help when asked to go the extra mile to aid work completion. For instance, one participant explained:

…a tutor went off sick and we were backlogged with a lot of work...the head tutor at the end of the year took it on himself to get us through that course, even though it wasn’t his course (Completed Apprentice)

However, the current apprentice participants revealed that whilst some tutors were helpful, others were not. A common concern among the current final year participants regarded the teaching style of one of their trainers:

“she has no patience for our kind of learning... if they maybe don’t know *[some basic information]* it she’ll sort of laugh at them, like throw it back in their face...” (Year 4 Apprentice)

These participants also perceived a lack of support from their employer regarding the challenges they were facing with some trainers. As similar problems had been reported for some time several of the apprentices felt that something should have been done to correct the problems. However, again, none of the managers appeared to be aware that this was an issue for their apprentices, as none made any comments in this regard.

**Factors influencing intentions to stay or leave an organisation**

The following section reports factors that are within the control of the employer and can influence decisions to remain or leave the organisation. Again these findings are reported under the two headline themes of Perceived Organisational Support and Leader-Member Exchange.

Factors influencing decisions to leave an apprenticeship were quite different to those influencing the apprentices’ decisions to remain in or leave the employing organisation. Again, the managers appeared to recognize only a limited subset of the issues that the apprentices mentioned.

**Perceived Organisational Support**

***Post apprenticeship pay***

Pay rates following completion of the apprenticeship was issue identified across all the focus groups as a factor determining intentions to stay at or leave their organisation. Most participants, despite being content with the apprentice rate, viewed their pay after completion negatively:

...I know for a fact by looking at jobs online, that I would get if I went to another company, four or five pounds an hour more...the wages in this company are quite low (completed apprentice)

Some of the participants had in fact left the organisation after completing their apprenticeship for better paying employers, but had since returned to the company for various reasons (e.g. geographical proximity, opportunity for more experience in a different role).

The focus group participants suggested that improving the pay post-apprenticeship would enhance retention rates. A completed apprentice suggested that “if your company [paid you really well], then you wouldn’t leave”. However, the fact that some had in fact returned, ‘pulled back’ by the potential offered by a different role, or by the reduced travelling times, suggests that pay is not quite the unambiguous issue that this employee implies.

**Career Progression**

In keeping with the reports from those completed apprentices who had returned to their former employer, career progression, like pay, was another key issue influencing intentions towards staying or leaving after completion and was cited in all focus groups and interviews with managers. One manager stated:

...the management levels of this organisation... quite a lot of them started as apprentices....so...that would be reason as to why you would want to stay because there is progression” (Line manager 3)

However, although the organisation was good at internally promoting people, participants felt that it would take about 10 to 20 years before there was an opportunity to assume a managerial position, a risk that most were not willing to take. There was a view that they would have to wait until they could fill a ‘dead man’s shoes’. The general comments pertaining to this theme are illustrated by the sentiments expressed in this quote:

...most of the management...supervisors...they’ve been here since the start, they are not going anywhere, so there’s no space to fill ...whereas you can...apply somewhere else for a more supervisory role (Completed Apprentice)

Current second year participants felt that some departments did not have career progression and that they were already at the highest position they could ever be in their department. Managers indicated that they were also aware that career progression was an issue that required attention and efforts were underway to address it.

**Challenging and interesting work**

Much HR theory suggests that where career progression is not available, then access to challenging and interesting work may help with retention. Access to challenging and interesting work was another key issue identified across all the current and completed apprentices – both as a positive and negative aspect. Some participants felt that their jobs were not challenging enough as they had to perform repetitive tasks. For this reason several were therefore planning to leave:

...50 percent of our jobs...it’s fitting and cleaning mainly, it’s pretty shallow (Year 2 Apprentice)

However, this was clearly dependent upon the department they were in, as other participants acknowledged that their work was challenging and interesting. A completed apprentice who had left the organisation and came back noted:

...there’s two factories...and I worked in the small one...I was very bored, I wasn’t feeling challenged...since I came back ...I’ve got more problems, the bigger castings, I was always dealing with smaller ones, they were far easier (Completed Apprentice).

**Workload**

Across all the focus groups there were reports that staying on at work after ‘knocking off’ time to complete tasks appeared to be expected or the organisational norm. Most participants did not mind going an extra mile in this regard, due to the payment of overtime. Recently completed apprentice participants, however, felt that there was unfair pressure to do so:

...you are not forced to stay on but it looks...negative towards you. Whereas, I know that other companies, if the time their finish is four o’clock they leave at four (Completed Apprentice)

One manager gave an illustration of an apprentice who had impressed them:

...I don’t have to ask him to do overtime, he comes to me and says...that's not finished...I’ll stay an hour behind to finish it...and that impresses me...people who are eager and are not willing to walk out the door as soon as finish time comes (Line Manager 3)

Reducing the workload or employing more people was therefore suggested by recently completed apprentices as a measure that would enhance retention rates. They believed that any reduction in the pressure of work would make them less likely to think about seeking alternative employment where they believed the workload to be less.

**Work environment**

Few completed apprentice participants said that they would consider leaving the company because of problems with the work environment. A few felt that there could be cleaner environments in alternative employment. One manager did recognize that this could be an issue:

...there’s basically molten metal everywhere. If you don't like getting dirty, you are not going to like working in this environment (Line manager 3)

**Job security**

Uncertainty about job security was an issue for most of the apprentices, as the company was facing challenges in its operations at the time the research was conducted.

...we don’t really know where it’s going to go...maybe it’s a case of next month we’ll be laid off (Completed Apprentice)

It appeared that there was lack of communication with employees on the current situation and potential repercussions arising from the prevailing difficulties. Despite the uncertainties, however, some participants were committed to staying with the organisation, provided their jobs remained safe. A few of the recently completed apprentices did say that uncertainty had led them to keep looking for other jobs, but equally would stay with the organisation if circumstances made this possible:

…at the end of the day, you need to think about your own job security, but if you know they might be getting a way through it and your job’s going to be alright then yeah, you would stay. (Completed apprentice)

**Additional training**

In line with the findings that apprentices appreciated opportunities for more interesting work and career progression, the provision of additional training beyond the apprenticeship was found to be a positive influence on the apprentices’ intentions to stay with the company, particularly for completed apprentices:

...they are happy enough to support you with further training, for example, the likes of welding. They would say yes to it because it helps them out (Completed Apprentice)

Other participants, however, felt that access to training depended on their manager and in certain instances, the processing of such requests was often delayed. In general, the apprentices reported that additional training would make them feel more positively disposed towards staying with the company. Two managers also recognised the benefits of this, with one in particular noting the benefits of additional training in terms of the apprentice’s future progression, and the utility of those additional skills, within the company:

…we would send some of them on other training that is outside of what is required to be an apprentice but it’s a benefit to them. It enhances their skills for here so it’s a win-win really. (Line Manager 1)

**Leader Member Exchange**

Leader member exchange factors also impacted on the decisions of apprentices regarding whether to remain with their current employer. This was specifically explored in terms of how the apprentice-supervisor relationship impacted on apprentice decisions to remain.

***Impact of support from supervisors***

Relationships with supervisors during the apprenticeship had a bearing on whether they would stay with the company or not. Most completed apprentices had positive experiences, which enhanced their intentions of staying with the organisation. However, those participants who had had negative experiences in this respect planned to leave after completion unless the current attitude of managers and supervisors changed. One apprentice commented that “It’s always easier to continue somewhere if you feel that you get on with your supervisor” (Year 4 Apprentice). There was a view that supervisors ‘looked down upon’ the apprentices; however, this was mostly expressed by the current apprentices, not those who had completed their programme, so it is questionable whether this is in fact a significant issue once apprentices have finished their training.

**Personal factors**

In addition to the factors identified above, apprentices also spoke of factors that were beyond the control of the employer, but which nonetheless influenced their thinking about whether to stay or leave their organization. As they are beyond the control of the employer they are also beyond the reach of policy or strategy and hence the focus of this study. However, they are reported here for the sake of completeness, given that these were identified by apprentices as being influences on their decision-making, although outside the focus of the work. The two personal factors identified were, respectively distance from home and the need to gain work experience.

**Discussion**

This study explored the views of current and completed apprentices and their managers regarding the factors that encourage completion of apprenticeship programmes and the intention to remain with the employer that invested in that training. The study utilized Social Exchange Theory as the conceptual lens through which to view the factors that affect apprentices’ decisions in this regard.

The findings pointed to overall positive views with regards to the costs and benefits of completing an apprenticeship, which were deemed largely mutually beneficial on the part of both employer and apprentice. Of particular note were findings relating to the importance of perceived organizational support as well as leader-member exchange factors such as supervisory support in encouraging apprentices to complete. Whilst satisfaction with pay informed apprentices’ decisions as to whether to stay or leave an apprenticeship programme, it was dissatisfaction with pay post-completion, the absence of opportunities for career progression and the availability of challenging and interesting work that were identified by apprentices as being likely to influence decisions regarding whether to stay with their current employer. It is worth noting that despite satisfactory pay being cited in the literature as a factor that encourages apprentices to remain, the focus groups suggest that while dissatisfaction with poor pay may drive (‘push’) decisions about whether to leave, satisfaction with pay may not contribute much to (‘pull’) decisions to stay.

It is clear, therefore, that different factors contribute to these two different decisions. These findings may therefore help refine the future focus of strategies for enhancing the retention rates post apprenticeship, as well as providing a snapshot of the prevailing experiences of these current and completed apprentices in a wider context.

Regarding the decision whether to stay with or leave the current employer, other factors such as workload and job security were also viewed as significant issues for some participants. While these factors were reported as influencing decision to remain with their employer they were not, however, found to influence the apprentices’ decisions regarding whether or not to complete the apprenticeship. Whether in fact workload and (lack of) job security would actually have any impact on decision to leave, though, is not certain, given it would also be likely to lead to reduced earnings (as the company was one of the better paying ones in the area); any decision would therefore most likely be a trade-off between these three factors.

***Factors affecting decision to complete the apprenticeship***

Most of the participants intended to complete their training because of the value they placed on the qualification, regardless of challenges faced. Completed apprentices had a limited perception of the way in which employers had supported them during the apprenticeship, with this mainly being in terms of the provision of the premises at which to do college work. Both current and completed apprentices commented that quality of on-the-job training had been an important factor in determining intentions to complete the apprenticeship and subsequently stay with their organisation. However, while previous research has pointed to the poor quality and perceived lack of relevance of both on and off-the-job training as having a negative impact on completion rates (Smith et al., 2005a; Snell and Hart, 2008) this was not the case here. While it is true that some participants viewed parts of the off-the-job training as lacking relevance, nonetheless few saw this as a reason for abandoning the programme, as they could see that any additional knowledge acquired (beyond that required for their current job) would likely be useful in gaining employment elsewhere.

Overall, apprentices who had positive perceptions of organisational support in areas such as apprentice pay, recognition and employer support reciprocated with intentions to complete the apprenticeship, while those with negative feelings of perceived organisational support were less committed to completing the apprenticeship. Despite overall positive views of organisational support, the focus groups suggested, however, that apprentices felt that they did not often receive any of the ‘softer’ forms of support or encouragement - a pat on the back, a few kind words. For many, the only evidence they received of their hard work or ‘going the extra mile’ was in their pay packet, in the form of overtime pay. While the extra pay was appreciated, the fact that this was the only recognition they received was resented.

These findings are in line with previous studies revealing that positive perceived organisational support enhances employee’s commitment to the organisation and reduces intentions to seek alternative employment (Ahmed et al., 2013; Alfes et al., 2013; Dawley et al., 2010; Loi et al., 2006; Wayne et al., 1997). What is surprising however is that something so basic as day-to-day encouragement and ‘positive strokes’, amongst people charged with supervising young people, should have emerged inform the research.

This has fairly clear implications for organisations seeking to encourage apprenticeship completions: development needs to be provided to ensure that supervisors and managers are aware of the importance of the ‘softer’ skills required for effective supervision and equipped with them. Another option might be to institute a way of ‘celebrating’ the achievements of apprentices: an ‘apprentice of the month’ (or quarter, or year) scheme to give some token recognition to the best apprentice, perhaps – although care needs to be taken to make sure that the efforts of all are not overlooked in so doing.

While most participants had high intentions of completing, challenges faced during the apprenticeship had influenced thoughts towards leaving. Some were context specific as in previous research (Harris et al., 2001; Latukha, 2011; Smith et al., 2005a): here, favouritism is an example, cited by some of the current apprentices. For these participants it was a key factor impacting on intention to complete an apprenticeship, and rendering them less inclined to stay with the organisation after completion. The specific issue was the belief that favouritism influenced the types of rotation or placement opportunities (and hence development opportunities) offered during the apprenticeship. It is not possible to determine the extent to which this was in fact the case, but having recognized the fact that apprentices believe this to be an issue that results in their being treated unfairly it is fairly easy for companies to address. If rotation amongst departments is to be a component of the training, then explaining to new apprentices at the outset how the system operates, along the process for rotating them through the various departments should help minimize future misunderstanding and resentment. This could be a part of the contract issued to all new apprentices. This would not need to be complicated – it could simply consist of an explanation setting out the various departments in which they should gain experience, and the target dates when the various apprentices would be placed in those locations. A chart showing these details could additionally be pinned up to the employees’ notice board (and/or emailed to all apprentices and managers/supervisors). Where apprentices in specific roles are thought to require posting to specific rotations, this also needs to be made clear. This would not only end apprentices’ speculations regarding the basis for perceived disparities in treatment but would minimize the opportunities for favouritism to occur.

The newer (that is, second year) apprentices also appeared less committed to their employer and to the programme than those further along their route to completion; However, in contrast to earlier research, these current apprentices had a stronger long term view of what they would gain from the apprenticeship, such as the qualifications and the experience that would increase their employability skills, rather than focusing on the challenges faced, as in previous research such as that by Snell and Hart, (2008).

Summarising the factors associated with leader member exchange, all the themes contributing to this such as supervisor support (Gow et al., 2008a; Smith et al., 2005a), favouritism and support from trainers (Smith et al., 2005a; Snell and Hart, 2008) were found to have an impact on the apprentices’ intentions to continue or discontinue an apprenticeship. Participants with unfavourable leader member exchange had expressed intentions to discontinue the apprenticeship, whereas those with favourable leader member exchange had higher intentions of completing the apprenticeship. Furthermore, the negative leader member exchange experienced by participants during their apprenticeships negatively impacted on intentions to stay with the company post apprenticeship, supporting the suggestion by Kim et al (2013) who pointed out that positive leader member exchange reduces intentions to leave an employer owing to high emotional attachment with supervisors.

Although participants had intentions of staying with the organisation after completion and in the case of the completed apprentices, had done so, at the point that the research was conducted most had remained with their original employer for only for around one to five years; furthermore some had already left and then returned. Others indicated that they did not intend to stay for very long, in line with the findings of previous studies (BIS, 2013). However, this research went a step further by establishing the reasons that influenced their intentions to stay for just a short time. These were primarily the opportunity of gaining more experience (one of the personal factors) and the search for better job prospects. Other organisational support factors impacting on intentions to stay at or leave under were post apprenticeship pay, career progression, challenging and interesting work, job security, workload, work environment and additional training. From amongst these factors, post apprenticeship pay appeared to be the most important predictor of the current apprentices’ intentions to leave their organisation after completion: while wages for the apprentices was perceived by most participants to be good, pay after completion was viewed as being low in comparison to other companies. This suggests that the strategy of employers in the manufacturing sector to offer competitive wages and benefits to qualified apprentices to enhance their retention rates is sensible, and in line with what has been suggested previously by Taylor and Poyner, 2008; Bougheas and Georgellis, 2004; Bloomfield, 2013; Hogarth et al., (2012).

Other key factors influencing intentions to leave were the lack of career progression and/or challenging and interesting work, in line with the findings of Ball, (1997); Boxall et al., (2003); and Latukha, 2011). All focus group participants were from ‘generation Y’, the cohort that is often reported to have a higher propensity to change jobs than those born in previous generations, according to researchers such as Cho and Lewis, 2012; K. Ito et al., 2013; and Latukha, (2011). Therefore, although money was a key factor in their intentions, challenging and interesting work and career progression were also found to influence their decisions. The findings therefore confirmed earlier work on perceived organizational support, namely that satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with factors such as recognition, pay and training quality, for example, could interact to negatively or positively impact upon intentions to progress with the apprenticeship and, subsequently, remain with the organisation post-completion (Ahmed et al., 2013; Alfes et al., 2013; Dawley et al., 2010; Loi et al., 2006; Wayne et al., 1997). However, personal factors such as distance from home (Latukha, 2011) and the need to get more experience could also have some impact on intentions to stay with the organisation in addition to pay and challenging and interesting work.

All the apprentices viewed the benefits of apprenticeships as largely exceeding the downsides of completing the program, with apprentices speaking positively of the experience gained, employer support and training provided. Bilginsoy (2003) has suggested that if the benefits of an apprenticeship are perceived as exceeding the costs, then apprentices are more likely to complete their training: given that most of the current apprentices did view the longer term benefits as outweighing the costs they did mostly intend to complete, supporting this suggestion. However, the research also revealed that participants in their earlier years of study were more likely to be thinking of discontinuing the apprenticeship than those in later years, in line with earlier findings by Malcomson et al., (2003). It is, perhaps, on this group that any efforts to improve retention on programme and completion should be focused.

Unlike previous research on apprenticeships, this research adds to the extant literature by providing reasons why the completed apprentices preferred only to stay with an organisation for a short period unlike previous research that has focused primarily on the provision of statistics regarding how long apprentices stayed with their employers. It also contributes to the literature in that it views the reasons influencing apprentices’ intention to continue or discontinue an apprenticeship and to stay with or leave their respective organisation after completion through the lens of social exchange theory, which was supported in this research. This is unlike previous research that viewed these factors through motivation theory. Furthermore, the research adds to the literature as it gathers experiences post apprenticeship as recommended by Bilginsoy (2003).

**Conclusion**

The main aim of this research was to investigate strategies that can enhance the completion rates of apprentices and their retention after finishing their training. It therefore adds to the knowledge base generated by previous research, which has mainly focused on factors influencing the completion of apprenticeships (e.g. Gambin and Hogarth, 2015). The study additionally adds to the literature on apprentice retention by gathering reports of experiences from current apprentices and those who had completed their apprenticeships. Insights were therefore gathered which may inform strategies for effectively retaining apprentices going forward.

The apprentice program organisations in question here appear to follow an investment strategy, aimed at the retention of most apprentices after completing their training (Backes-Gellner et al., 2010; CEBR, 2015). Viewed through the lens of social exchange theory the organisations could be viewed as weighing the costs of apprenticeships to the organisation against the benefits. The research indicated that the benefits of the apprenticeship to employers outweighed the costs despite the expense involved in training an apprentice in engineering frameworks (CEBR, 2015; Hogarth et al., 2012).

Again, consistent with social exchange theory, the organisations under consideration in this study mostly viewed their apprentices as a valuable resource and aimed to reward their high performance in both on- and off- the job training by offering them permanent employment after completion. It was therefore the main aim of this research to investigate the factors that can enhance the completion rates of apprentices and ensure their retention at their employing organisations after finalising the apprentice programme, within the Northern Irish context and, based on this, to develop recommendations to assist employers to improve completion and retention rates.

The perceived organisational support factors that can enhance intentions to complete an apprenticeship are apprentice pay, support from the employer, recognition and quality of on-the-job training. The findings suggest that the higher the apprentice pay, the higher the intentions to complete their training. Therefore, enhancing apprentice pay should be considered as a key strategy for retaining qualified apprentices. It is recognized that this may not always be feasible however, as this may be inhibited by resource constraints.

Support and recognition from the employer also had a key role in intentions to stay in or leave an apprenticeship. There was some indication that the organisations fell down in this key respect. Therefore development programmes should be considered as a way to help supervisors to develop their supervisory and coaching/mentoring skills to address the issue of apprentices reporting that they receive insufficient support. Encouraging supervisors to recognize the contribution made by apprentices may be a particularly important area for work, as this area was found to not only impact on completion rates, but on decisions to stay on with the employer after completion (Boxall et al., 2003).

This action would also be likely to have the additional benefit of improving supervisor-apprentice relationships, one of the leader-member exchange factors found to influence both completion and retention rates. Previous research has suggested that unhealthy supervisor-apprentice relationships contribute to non-completion of apprenticeships (Gow et al., 2008a; Smith et al., 2005a), while the current work indicated that support (or lack of it) from supervisors not only impacted on intentions to complete the apprenticeship, but also had a bearing on apprentices’ decisions to stay with or leave the employer after completion; participants who had negative experiences were more likely to say they intended to leave after completion for this reason. Therefore, enhancing relationships between apprentices and supervisors during and after their training could have a significant positive impact on both completion and retention rates.

The quality of on-the-job training, although not cited by all focus groups, was relevant to those who were contemplating leaving the apprenticeship. Therefore, in order to prevent such apprentices from leaving the organisation, employers should examine details of the training being offered and ensure that the programmes are fit for purpose and deliver a high quality learning experience. Where necessary (and feasible) they should consider switching training providers to ensure a better match with their needs.

Post- apprenticeship pay was reported as having a significant impact on completion rates, and as a key factor informing apprentice decisions to remain with or leave their respective organisations once they completed their training and were fully qualified. However, it is important to note that, in the context of this research, pay was not considered in isolation by the participants but in combination with other factors such as challenging and interesting work, career progression (Boxall et al., 2003), distance from home and experience. Therefore it is suggested that, where post-apprenticeship retention is an issue, employers should focus on a range of perceived organizational support factors such as post apprenticeship pay, the availability of challenging and interesting work and career progression when discussing employees’ future employment prospects at appraisal or meetings to discuss future development options. However, it should be noted that since most of the apprentices (both currently studying and completed) reported that they were, in fact, paid higher than the recommended rate, it is questionable quite how influential pay is as a factor affecting retention rates for these employees in this situation. Clearly this is an area in which a large scale quantitative study would have value.

Overall, the study showed that participants with high levels perceived organizational support and positive leader-member exchange had higher intentions of completing an apprenticeship and thereafter staying with the employer after completion. . The main recommendations to aid apprentices complete of their training focus on enhancing the support provided by the employer, ensuring quality of on-the-job training, enhancing recognition mechanisms, increasing collaboration with off-the-job trainers and ensuring transparency and clarity of organizational processes to reduce perceptions of favouritism. Recommendations to aid retention centre around the consideration of post-apprentice pay rates, career progression within the organisation and the provision of interesting/challenging work.

Future research would seek to follow up with a large-scale, quantitative study to confirm and/or extend these findings. Following that, these factors should be further explored across geographical boundaries and in differing contexts to examine the extent to which the findings extend to other countries and sectors.

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1. For example, In England leavers are broken down by age profile. This statistic is not reported in Northern Ireland [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Member checking: Where data was returned to participants to clarify accuracy and check if it resonates with their experiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note that this was also raised by the third year, but not by any of the completed, apprentices. This rather suggests that there has been some change in the last few years that has led to some dissatisfaction. However, without further investigation this must remain conjecture, but would obviously repay further investigation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)