

## **Safety in stereotypes?: The impact of gender and ‘race’ on young people’s perceptions of their post-compulsory education and labour market opportunities**

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This paper examines the impact of gender and ‘race’ on young people’s perceptions of the educational and labour market opportunities available to them after they complete their compulsory schooling in England. Its findings are based on a study of the views of girls and boys about the government-supported ‘Apprenticeships’ programme, which, because it reflects labour market conditions, is highly gendered and also segregated by ethnicity. The research shows that young people receive very little practical information and guidance about the consequences of pursuing particular occupational pathways, and are not engaged in any formal opportunities to debate gender and ethnic stereotyping as related to the labour market. This is particularly worrying for females who populate apprenticeships in sectors with lower completion rates and levels of pay, and which create less opportunity for progression. In addition, the research reveals that young people from non-White backgrounds are more reliant on ‘official’ sources of guidance (as opposed to friends and families) for their labour market knowledge. The paper argues that, because good quality apprenticeships can provide a strong platform for lifelong learning and career progression, young people need much more detailed information about how to compare a work-based pathway with full-time education. At the same time, they also need to understand that apprenticeships (and jobs more generally) in some sectors may result in very limited opportunities for career advancement.

### **Introduction**

One of the reasons why apprenticeship is still valued around the world as model of skill formation is its focus on the development of aptitudes that serve the individual throughout their working life, but which can also be applied in a wide range of learning settings. These aptitudes include analytical and problem-solving skills, and an understanding of how individuals share skills and knowledge within their occupational community of practice. Former apprentices who have experienced a good quality apprenticeship will relate how this early grounding has played a significant part in their decisions to participate in learning throughout life (see Vickerstaff, 2003; Fuller and Unwin, 2001). In addition, when apprenticeship is

firmly anchored within an organisation's business strategy, the opportunities for further work-based learning and job progression are also increased (see Fuller and Unwin, 2003a). For young people who found that compulsory schooling did not provide them with enough chances to demonstrate their capabilities, apprenticeship can also have a significant impact on their confidence as learners (see Unwin and Wellington, 2001). It could be argued, therefore, that apprenticeship should still provide a worthwhile option for young people as they consider the pathways available to them following compulsory schooling.

There are, however, three key reasons why choosing to become an apprentice in the United Kingdom (UK) needs very careful thought. Firstly, and unlike in many other European countries, young people can still leave full-time education at 16 to enter a labour market where employers are under no obligation to provide any form of training. The continued reluctance of governments to intervene in employment practices has a serious impact on government-sponsored work-based programmes such as apprenticeship. This means that UK apprenticeships vary considerably, both within and across occupational sectors, in terms of availability, quality and likelihood of completion (see Ryan and Unwin, 2001; Fuller and Unwin, 2003b). There are, of course, examples of good practice in all sectors, but the inadequate provision dominates to the extent that only one third of apprentices currently complete their programme and attain the prescribed qualifications (ATF, 2005). Thirdly, and relatedly, the changing nature of the UK economy, which has seen a decline in manufacturing and a rapid expansion of the service sectors, means that the concept of an apprenticeship is being fragmented, with some so-called apprenticeships offering nothing more than induction training. Government-supported apprenticeships in the

UK vary in length according to the time required to attain the vocational qualifications specified by the agencies responsible for designing apprenticeship frameworks for their sectors: currently, this falls to the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). Some vocational qualifications (notably in sectors such as engineering and construction) take far longer to complete than others (for example in retailing) and, hence, the average number of months spent in an apprenticeship can range from under one year to over three years. In September 2001, the Cassels's review of apprenticeships recommended that apprenticeships leading to level 2 qualifications should last a minimum of one year and those leading to level 3 qualifications requirement should last a minimum of two years (see DfES/LSC 2001), but this has not been implemented.<sup>1</sup> These concerns are further compounded when we examine contemporary apprenticeships from the perspectives of gender and ethnicity. If the potential of apprenticeship to contribute to an individual's propensity for learning is to be realised, it must be structured in such a way as to ensure that both males and females, regardless of ethnic background, enjoy access to similar levels of vocational education and training, thus providing an equitable platform for progression beyond the apprenticeship.

This paper presents findings from our research into employers' and young people's attitudes to apprenticeship in five occupational sectors in England: construction; early years care and education; engineering manufacture; IT and electronic services; and plumbing. The research was funded by the UK's Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), and formed part of its General Formal Investigation (GFI) into gender segregation in the UK labour market. Alongside the social justice imperative to address gender segregation, the EOC has also stressed the economic case as skill

shortages exist in the sectors with least female participation. The UK's government-supported apprenticeship programme, established in 1994 as the Modern Apprenticeship (MA)<sup>2</sup> is highly segregated with regards to both gender and ethnicity. In this respect, it has completely failed to make any impact in terms of one of the original aims of the programme, which was to encourage a more equal balance of the sexes in heavily male or female dominated sectors. The term 'Modern' denoted the desire of the then Conservative government to create a new type of apprenticeship, one which would break the traditional mould (see Unwin and Wellington, 2001). This meant expanding apprenticeships to a much wider range of sectors than in the past (including, for example, business administration, retailing, and health and social care). It also meant abandoning the 'time-served' element imposed by trade unions as a way of ensuring apprentices could not easily displace older workers, whilst at the same time recognising that the concept of maturation was a key aspect in formation training. Instead of lasting a set period of time, 'modern' apprenticeships would be linked to the UK's competence-based approach to vocational qualifications: if it took six months for an individual to become competent and achieve the prescribed qualification, then that's how long the apprenticeship should last.

The expansion into sectors without a history of apprenticeship was encouraged for two reasons: firstly, because it would bring UK apprenticeship more into line with those in Germany, where apprenticeships had long reflected the diversity in the economy; and secondly, as a way to significantly increase the number of female apprentices. Apprenticeships are now available in some 90 sectors, with the ten most populated being: engineering; construction; hairdressing; automotive; business administration; hospitality; customer service; electro-technical; health and social care;

and retail. As the following tables show, whilst the expansion in terms of females has certainly been achieved (more girls now start apprenticeships than boys), the distribution across sectors still reflects age-old stereotypes. Given that the percentage of the ‘non-white’ population for England currently stands at 7.9%, young people classified as being other than ‘white British’ reveal the stark ethnic exclusivity of apprenticeships, especially (though not exclusively) in industrial and manufacturing sectors. The tables are divided into ‘Advanced Apprenticeship’ (level 3) and ‘Apprenticeship (level 2)’, and include two sectors (plumbing and information technology), which fall outside the ‘top ten’, as these were included in the research project discussed later in this paper.

**Table 1: Advanced Apprenticeships (level 3)**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>% Female</b>	<b>%non-White</b>
Engineering	2.8	2.6
Construction	1.2	1.7
Hairdressing	94.9	2.2
Automotive	2.0	4.4
Business Admin	81.9	7
Hospitality	51.8	2.2
Customer Service	73.8	5.3
Electro-technical	0.7	2.0
Health & social care	87.2	7.7
Early Years Care and Education	97.7	8.4
Plumbing	0.5	2.3
IT&Electronic Services	11.5	12.9

**Table 2: Apprenticeships (level 2)**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>% Female</b>	<b>%non-White</b>
Engineering	3.6	3.8
Construction	1.2	2.5
Hairdressing	90.9	3.7
Automotive	1.75	4.8
Business Admin	75.8	11.8
Hospitality	51.5	3.5
Customer Service	73.8	7.3
Electro-technical	0.8	2.5
Health & social care	87.6	7.5
Early Years Care and Education	96.9	6.9
Plumbing	1.1	2.1
IT&Electronic Services	10.9	13.1

Source: [www.apprenticeships.org.uk/partners/frameworks/apprenticeshipsdata/reports200420](http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk/partners/frameworks/apprenticeshipsdata/reports200420)

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Six out of ten apprentices recruited to the ‘Advanced Apprenticeship’ (Level 3) are male, and females are concentrated in the low pay ‘female’ sectors. The figures for the sectors with greatest prospects in terms of earning potential and career advancement illustrate the divide. For example: in the Advanced Apprenticeship in Engineering in 2005, there are 94 females and 3,599 males; in Plumbing, there are 7 females and 639 males; and in the Electro-technical sector, the split is 22 females and 2,318 males. This has particular consequences in terms of equal opportunities and

social justice: firstly, the labour market returns to a level 3 qualification are greater (McIntosh, 2005); secondly, achievement at level 3 provides a much stronger platform for further progression both in terms of the requirements needed to enter higher education programmes and professional qualifications; thirdly, entrants to “Advanced Apprenticeships” are more likely to have employed-status, which means they receive a wage from their employer rather than a training ‘allowance’ from the State (see Fuller et al, 2005); and, fourthly, initial pay rates are considerably higher in the male dominated sectors (Millar et al, 2004; Hogarth and Hasluck, 2003).

The paper is now divided into six sections. The first section discusses the extent and consequences of gender segregation in the UK labour market. The second section provides details of the research study’s methodology. The third, fourth and fifth sections report the findings, and the sixth section provides some concluding remarks.

### **Gender and ‘race’ segregation in the UK labour market**

There is clearly an important debate to be had about the nature of formation training and lifelong learning more generally in an era of such economic flux, and about the role of the State in an increasingly globalised marketplace. As Fenwick (2004:169) reminds us, the discourse of the so-called New Economy, with its stress on “employability, enterprise and human capital”, perceives lifelong learning as being “critical to survival”. Yet the reality of many contemporary workplaces points to an under-utilisation of skills and narrowing of job boundaries (see Brown et al, 2001; Toyne, 2004). As Jackson (2003:374) argues, far from reaping the benefits of investing in lifelong learning, it is more likely that working-class women will be “trapped in a cycle of lifelong *earning* that centres on low-paid, low-status jobs that

are often part-time or fixed term”. Despite the fact that the various government-sponsored training initiatives for young people and adults over the past thirty years have included exhortations to employers and training providers to embrace equal opportunities, there has been an absence of any corresponding attempt to tackle the underlying and long-standing structural inequalities in the UK’s labour market, without which training policies on their own can do little to advance social justice. (see Brine 1997 and 1999).

There is a trend across EU countries for a decline in gender segregation across age cohorts for female graduates but the level has remained steady for those with lower education attainment (Dolado *et al*, 2002). Within this, the UK ranks in the intermediate to high levels of segregation (see EGGE, 2001). Segregation is both a vertical phenomenon, restricting individuals to the lower levels of an organization, and horizontal, in that individuals are also restricted to particular occupations (see Miller *et al*, 2004; Blackburn *et al*, 2002). There is far less knowledge about ethnic segregation in the labour market though it seems that, unlike in the United States, public employment and education do not reduce racial segregation in Britain (King, 1995). Within this, and with the exception of Black Caribbean workers, occupational sex segregation seems to be lower among women and men from ethnic minority backgrounds than it is amongst Whites (Blackwell, 2003). A stronger inclusion of workers from more varied backgrounds is thus not only a means to address economic and social inequalities and overcoming race-based dichotomies (see Abbas, 2005) but could also be an additional way in which to address gender segregation. To achieve this, it is important not only to understand gender and racial segregation but also the intersections between both, and the complex reasons which cause people to become



segregated (see also Crompton and Harris, 1998a and b).

The result of the different educational choices made by boys and girls has an impact on occupational distributions and therefore segregation: the more education and occupation are linked, the stronger the effect on gender segregation (see Borghans and Groot, 1999). In this paper we are interested in the support and advice structures in place to help young people make such significant decisions about their life. We look, therefore, at the aims and interests of young people as well as the experiences they have had or expect to have with careers advice services. However, it must be stressed that such provisions do not act within a vacuum as the considerable influence of socialisation and change agents in the form of, for example, parents, teachers, and friends has to be considered (Roger and Duffield, 2000). Gender and race will make significant differences in the way such influences occur. As Hodkinson et al (1996:149-150) argue, young people “make career decisions within their horizons for action”, which are “both enabling and restricting” (see also Evans et al, 2000).

The decision making process of young people and the influence exerted by change agents takes place in an environment where equal opportunities policies are perceived to be insufficient (Creegan *et al*, 2003, Hoque and Noon, 2004). In addition, young people’s decisions have to be set in the context of the Government’s push for a higher proportion of each cohort to attend university and the problematic history of vocational education and training in the UK (see Unwin, 2004; DfES, 2005a). Young people developing their identity, in part via decisions about their future, will be affected by such social contexts (see Scourfield *et al*, 2005). For young people from ethnic minority backgrounds it is also significant that there are suggestions of

considerable failings of multiculturalism in the current period, with many suggesting a return to assimilation (Abbas, 2005). This is an additional pressurising influence, which reinforces social expectations and restrictions. However, Scourfield *et al* (2005) find that children use a variety of creative strategies to negotiate their identity, and, as such, these factors need to be considered by those constructing educational and welfare policies.

We argue that the choices made at an early stage in young people's lives have considerable influence on an individual's career trajectory, often resulting in a reinforcement of labour market segregation. The lack of structured support and clear information channels identified in our research should therefore be addressed as a means to improve personal opportunities and career paths, as well as also helping to correct skills shortages.

### **Methodology and data collection**

The study reported here employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods in order to develop a deeper understanding of the processes that give rise to occupational choices. Whilst the main focus was on gender, the study also took the opportunity to collect information on how participants categorised themselves in terms of ethnicity. The study was conducted in four English local Learning and Skills Council (LSCs) areas: Greater Manchester; Nottinghamshire; London East; and Wiltshire and Swindon<sup>3</sup>

In the two years coming up to the end of their period of compulsory schooling, young people in the UK are faced with a number of 'pathways': remain in full-time

education (at school or college); seek a place on the government-supported apprenticeship programme; find a job; combine part-time work with study; enter the informal economy. In England, the number of 16 year olds staying in full-time education rose sharply in the late 1980s and early 1990s to around 70 per cent, but has since plateaued. In 2004, the rate dropped back to 68.4 per cent (DfES, 2005b). Of those, over 10 per cent drop out at 17, and by 18, 35 per cent are left in full-time education. Using Department for Education and Skills (DfES) classifications, around 10 per cent of young people are in some form of government-supported ‘work-based learning’ (mainly apprenticeship) between the ages of 16 and 19, around 4 per cent are in jobs where the employer pays the training costs and the training is formally recognised, and a remaining 15 per cent are spread across jobs (without recognised training) or cannot be traced<sup>4</sup>. Given then that significant numbers of 16 –19 year olds can potentially enter the labour market, we wanted to explore the extent to which young people in our sample could be said to be in a position to make an informed ‘choice’ and the type of picture they were forming about their occupational horizons from the position of their gender and ethnicity. In addition, we wanted to examine how this picture then impacts on the young people’s ability to assess the relative merits of remaining in full-time education as opposed to seeking an apprenticeship.

The empirical research with young people consisted of two related components: eight focus groups were held with groups of around 6 boys and girls aged 14 and 15; and a questionnaire survey to all 14 and 15 year olds in the eight participating schools<sup>5</sup>. The schools were all mixed sex and were selected to obtain a sample broadly reflective of State-funded schools in England in terms of: urban and rural catchment areas; results in public examinations at 16; and to include a range of schools catering for 11-16 year

olds and 11 – 18 year olds. The survey was distributed to a total of 1,802 students. A 71 per cent response rate (1,281 completed surveys) was achieved. During the focus groups, no information about participants was collected to ensure data protection and to encourage them to feel comfortable about saying what they really felt in the discussions. In the main, therefore, this paper will therefore draw on the results of the survey although we do use quotations from both the focus groups to highlight issues or further explain survey outcomes. The sample overall was 54 percent male and 46 percent female. The gender ratio differed in that females were in the majority (52%) amongst whites but a minority (40%) amongst ethnic minorities. Survey participants were 73 percent White and 27 percent from ethnic minority backgrounds. The ‘White’ group includes White British (70%), White Irish (1%) and White Other (2%).

We have grouped ethnic minorities into Black, Asian / Chinese, and Other because cell sizes would become too small to be significant with any further disaggregation. Even as they stand, results should be considered indicative rather than conclusive. The ‘Black’ group includes those young people who ticked Black Caribbean (4%), Black African (3%), Black Other (1%), Mixed White and Black Caribbean (3%), Mixed White and Black African (1%) in our survey, thus making up a total of 12 percent of our sample. The ‘Asian and Chinese’ group includes those who selected Indian (3%), Pakistani (4%), Bangladeshi (1%), Asian Other (1%), Mixed White and Asian (1%) and Chinese (1%). The Asian and Chinese group accounts for 11 percent of our sample. As there are significant differences in the overall socio-economic performance especially in the Asian and Chinese group (see *inter alia* Francis and Archer, 2005), we controlled separately for respondents who identified themselves as Indian and Chinese.

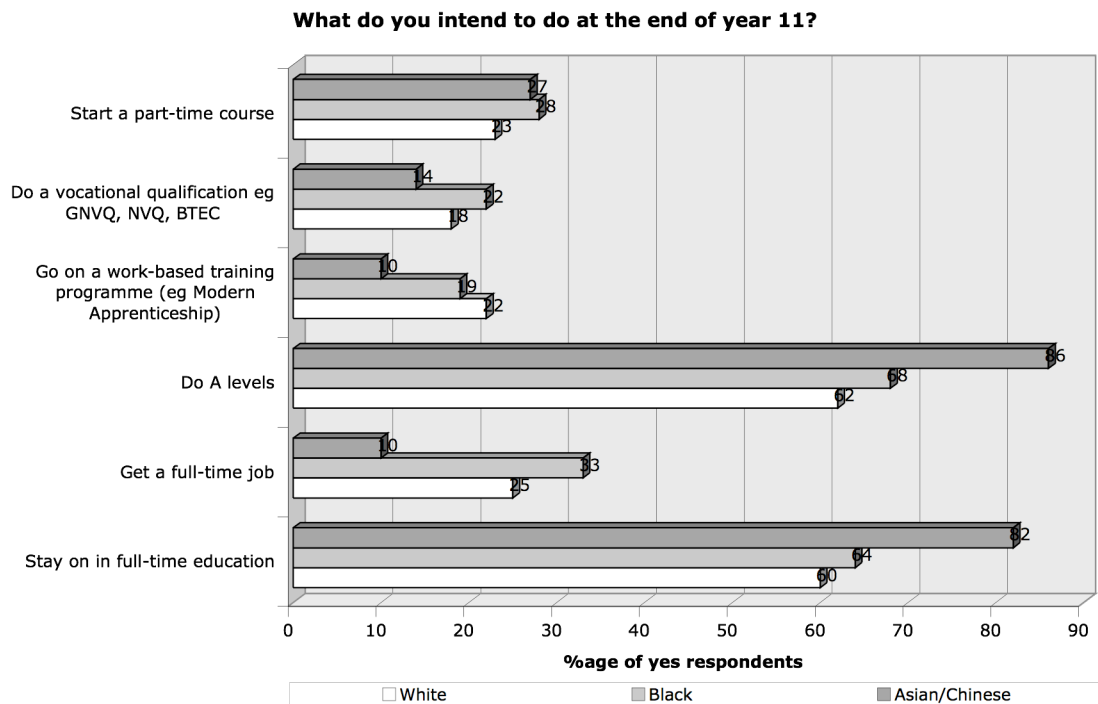
### **Short and medium term plans of young people**

The young people responding to our survey indicated that the long-term developments in their life were important and were being considered. The majority of all our respondents (87%) strongly agreed or agreed that ‘choosing a career with long-term prospects is very important to me’. Slightly higher support for the statement was voiced by girls (89%) and by Asian/Chinese respondents (91%). Despite this common interest in long-term prospects, considerable differences in education and labour market performances of women and men and of different ethnic minority groups are well established. Education is often considered one of the most important factors in addressing discrimination and ‘ethnic penalties’ in the labour market (Heath *et al*, 2000) though, for example, certain Black African groups match Indian educational achievements but do not attain their employment status (Berthoud, 2000). There are indications that ethnic minority groups are more likely to stay on in full-time education after compulsory schooling than White young people, whereas the latter are better represented in full-time employment and government supported training schemes (Pathak, 2000). This trend holds true for both male and female ethnic minorities as nearly 60 percent of ethnic minority young women are in higher education as are nearly 50 percent of ethnic minority men compared with only 31 percent of white women and under 30 percent of white men (NAO, 2002).

The short and medium term plans of our respondents reflect the increased attractiveness to young people of a more prolonged participation in the education system. Our survey investigated the options which young people were considering on

completion of their compulsory schooling (end of year 11) and found that staying on in full-time education and doing A levels were by far the most popular options. This is unsurprising given that A levels remain the key requirement for entry to university in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the heavy promotion by the Labour government of its policy to get 50 per cent of young people into higher education. The following chart shows the dominance of the full-time education route, though respondents could indicate more than one option.

**Figure 1: Preferred pathways at the end of compulsory schooling (Year 11)**



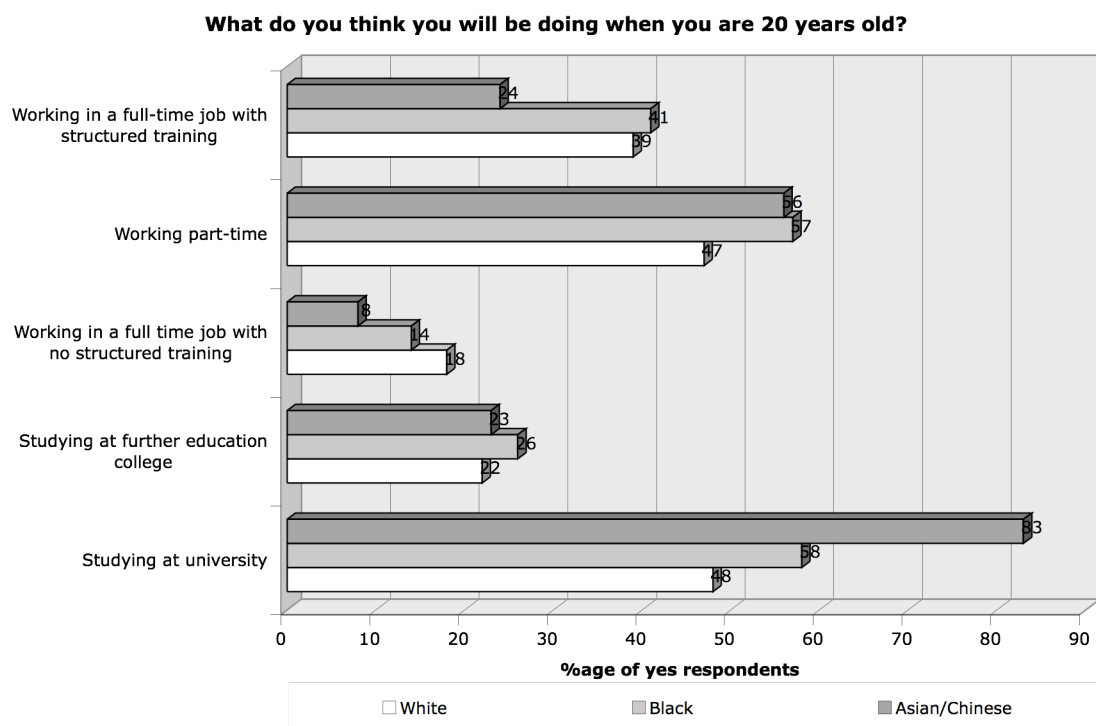
The chart indicates differences between the three groups' intentions in that those from an Asian or Chinese background are particularly clear about continuing their education and not being interested in a vocational education, a work-based training programme or a full-time job. This group indicated being only half as interested in pursuing a work-based training programme when compared to their White

counterparts and only 10 percent thought they might get a full-time job. Black groups followed the overall pattern of young people wanting to remain in education but there are two exceptions. Young Blacks were more interested than other groups in getting a full-time job and doing a national vocational qualification. It could be speculated that these responses are indications of underachievers, especially amongst Afro-Caribbean teenagers, that have been reported on recently (Ahmed, 2003; Demie, 2005). Amongst all respondents, girls are even more positive about choosing to remain in full-time education and take A levels than boys. Correlating race and gender we can thus see that 92 percent of female respondents from the Asian and Chinese group (79% males) plan to stay in full-time education and 95 percent of this group (82% male) intend to study for A-levels.

Moreover, 48 percent of both the female and the male sample agreed with the statement ‘You have to have A levels or a degree to get well paid jobs’, suggesting that the choice to stay on in education is to some extent linked to their lifestyle aspirations. Young people are clearly absorbing messages about the importance of continuing education and are acting accordingly. Our findings support Francis’s (2002) research which showed that whilst girls’ occupational choices have become more ambitious, both girls and boys are starved of the precise information they need to place their choices in the context of the realities of the labour market. In addition, our survey found that the education route is a useful way to postpone the decision making process, possibly as a result of having insufficient information on a range of career routes and opportunities. A female focus group member in England explained the appeal of staying in education by stating that it was, “...too scary to go out into the world of work. If you go to college you put off making a decision about what job

you wanted to do”. It seems logical, therefore, for young people to try and avoid risks in their immediate and medium-term plans. When young people were asked what they thought they would be doing when they are 20 years old, the educational route is still dominant. Overall, over 50 per cent of survey respondents in England indicated that they would be studying at university.

**Figure 2: Future aspirations**



The most popular choices for White respondents are studying at University (48%) and working part-time (47%). Cross-referencing all responses between studying at university with working part time revealed that 60 per cent of those aspiring to university expected also to be working part-time. Here we see a weaving together of an extended education route with labour market participation. In addition, 39 percent of White respondents indicated they would be working in a full-time job with structured training. More Asian/Chinese and Black respondents thought they would



be studying at University (83% and 58% respectively) and thought they would be working part-time (56% and 57% respectively). It could be that the latter figures show that the financial strain of attending university is felt more acutely by students from ethnic minority backgrounds thus resulting in the need for more part-time jobs. It is also noteworthy that Black respondents ticked the options 'working in a full-time job with structured training' and 'studying at a further education college' most. Here we may also see the choices of those individuals who are perceived to be underperforming and who may not feel they like academic study enough to continue along the education route. Having outlined some of the general tendencies in the short and medium term choices of young people, we now turn to more specific choices with regard to areas of work and specific career paths.

### **Section Three: Potential career paths**

Respondents were asked what broad category of work most interested them. Responses reveal considerable differences according to gender and race. For example, in relation to caring, 75 percent of male respondents indicated that they were 'not interested at all' compared with 25 percent of females. The opposite picture was given in relation to 'technical/engineering occupations' where 17 percent of male respondents were 'not interested at all', compared with 83 percent of females. Similarly, in construction, less than a third (31%) of male respondents were 'not interested at all', compared with the vast majority (88%) of females. Given the poorer prospects for pay and career progression in the more 'female' sectors of the economy, it is perhaps not surprising that boys are restricting their options to what they see as safer 'male' pathways. Similarly, almost twice as many Asian/Chinese and Black respondents (48% and 46%) expressed an interest in Business as a broad category of

work when compared to Whites (24%). Conversely, twice as many White respondents (20%) than Asian/Chinese (11%) and Black (10%) respondents are very interested in caring.

**Figure 3: Interest in work**



Females were much more likely than males “to consider learning a job normally done by the opposite sex” (36% as opposed to 14% of males). More than double the number of males (44%) than females (20%) said they would definitely not try a non-traditional job. The focus groups revealed that boys were worried about being teased, especially about their sexuality, if they trained for a traditionally female occupation (see Simpson, 2004). Girls, however, were more concerned about how they would be treated in the workplace if they decided to enter a traditionally male occupation. This finding is interesting in the light of Davies et al’s (2005:45) study of male pupils in English schools, which argues that, “males are likely to be more bold, reckless and

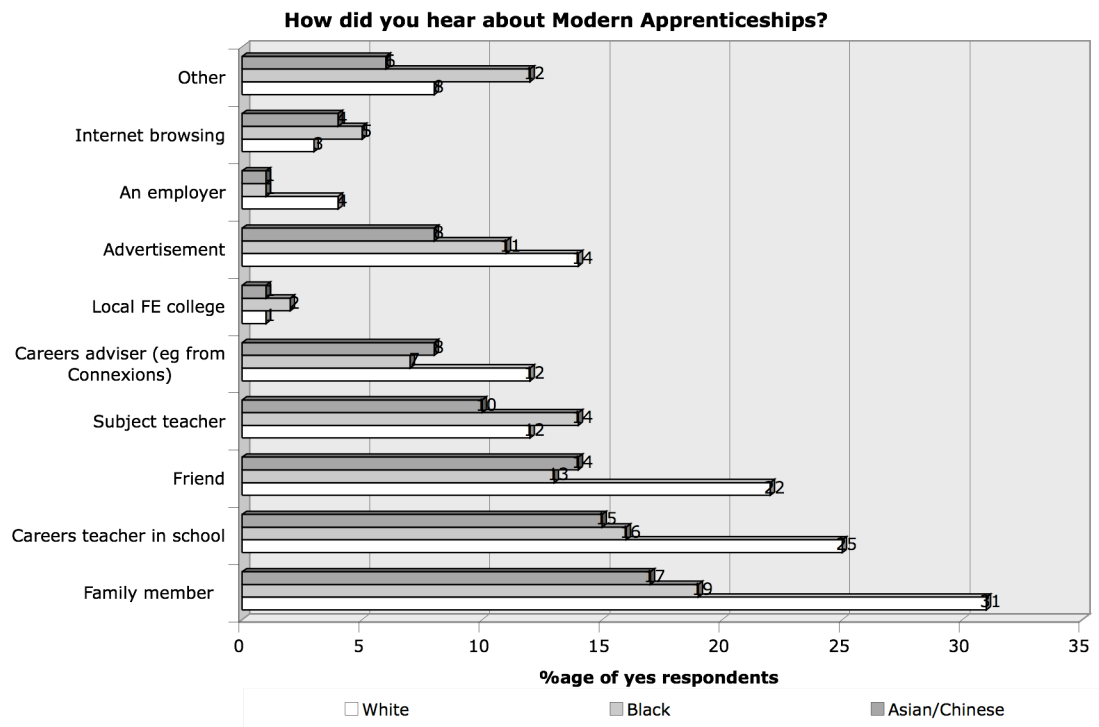
adaptable in their learning”. Behaviour patterns in the classroom do not, necessarily, provide insights into boys’ (or girls’) perceptions of their lives beyond school.

In addition to the general area of work, our survey questioned young people about learning on the job. Confronted with the statement ‘I like the sound of jobs which have structured training’, 81 percent of all respondents (84% male, 78% female) strongly agreed or agreed. There were no differences in the ethnic analysis. This could indicate an interest in structured and/or work-based training programmes such as apprenticeships. Overall, a majority of respondents had heard of apprenticeships but this was far more prevalent among white respondents (74%) than those of ethnic minority background (53%). Only half of the Asian / Chinese and just under two thirds of the Black respondents had heard of apprenticeships. More males (71%) than females (66%) reported having some information on the programme. Although the majority of young people had heard of apprenticeships, the focus groups in England revealed that their actual knowledge was usually extremely hazy. The lack of detailed knowledge is reflected in the fact that 63 per cent of respondents stated that they would like to know more about apprenticeships. It is noteworthy that girls (65%) are slightly more interested in further information about apprenticeships than boys (61%). Black respondents (72%) are more interested in receiving further information about apprenticeships than Whites (62%) and Asians/Chinese (58%).

In this context it is important to establish what the sources of young peoples’ information are so as to ascertain how to improve their knowledge base for decision-making processes. The majority of respondents indicated they had heard of apprenticeships through informal information sources (e.g. family and friends), with

10 per cent more boys than girls hearing about apprenticeships from a family member. This difference could be related to patterns of traditional recruitment in sectors with long histories of apprenticeship where often it would be fathers or other close male relatives who would introduce the next generation into a trade or industry. The second and third most popular sources of information are careers teachers and friends. In terms of this sample, girls seem less dependent on direct personal contacts for their information than boys. For example, 10 per cent more girls than boys mentioned an advertisement as their source of information about apprenticeships. One girl said: “I saw an advert last night on it on telly”. The main difference between White respondents and those from ethnic minority backgrounds is that the latter report receiving far less information from family members, friends and careers teachers in schools and via most of the other options given to survey respondents. The exceptions are that Black young people seem to obtain more information from a subject teacher and from local FE colleges than other youths. Importantly, both Asian/Chinese and Black respondents are more likely to have found out about apprenticeships by browsing the Internet, which could be considered a pro-active approach to obtaining careers advice. Overall, relatively few young people had heard about apprenticeships from Connexions (the careers service)<sup>7</sup> and the figures are lower for ethnic minorities than for Whites. This raises questions about whether the service is easily and equally accessible to young people and what information is provided.

**Figure 4: Sources of knowledge on apprenticeships**



### The role of careers advice

From the age of 14, young people begin making choices in relation to their post-school futures. As well as curricula and qualification-based choices, they also attend careers education sessions, and, by the age of 15/16 should have access to a careers teacher or guidance officer. Lack of information about the labour market as well as specific occupations was a central theme to emerge from the empirical work conducted. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, 'I'd like to know more about what's actually involved in jobs which are normally done by either males or females', and 76 percent agreed or agreed strongly. More girls (82%) than boys (70%) agreed. Asian/Chinese respondents (83%) were more interested in finding out about a broader range of jobs than Whites (75%) and Blacks (71%). Moreover, focus group discussions revealed that young people find it difficult to name the main employers in their locality. Young people did not make

connections between the sorts of employment opportunities available in their area and their future plans. From the young people's point of view, local employers are not visible or accessible. Consequently, the opportunities they potentially afford young people to learn about the world of work through work experience placements, tasters, talks and visits are not being effectively utilised.

Since September 2004, it has been a statutory requirement that schools provide an element of work-related learning at Key Stage 4 (15 and 16 year olds) and most schools do this through sending pupils out on one or two-week work experience placements with local employers. In our focus groups, girls and boys stressed the important role that work experience can play in helping them get a 'taste' of different types of jobs. Unfortunately, Francis et al's (2005:iii) research for the EOC's GFI has shown that the actual uptake of these placements "reflects and potentially perpetuates gender stereotyping". Their findings show that even though girls and boys expressed interest in taking non-traditional placements, they were not encouraged or helped to do so, and only 15 per cent in their sample had received advice or information about such placements.

One of the main ways in which young people's lack of knowledge could be addressed is via careers information and guidance provision. In this regard, the young people in this study were usually aware that this type of provision should be available at school. Four sources of provision were mentioned by young people: careers lessons usually 'delivered' as part of the Personal and Social Education (PSE) curriculum in school; through a teacher with responsibility for careers advice; through visits from Connexions and individual appointments with Connexions advisors; and via events

such as careers evenings. Our evidence indicated that the availability and quality of careers information and guidance was patchy, and dependent on the ability and willingness of individuals to dedicate time and interest to this area of young people's development. Problems with all four types of provision were mentioned.

The availability of Connexions advisors and careers teachers varied considerably. Generally, young people were expected to make an appointment for a one-to-one meeting. This process was mentioned repeatedly by respondents as a real barrier to them accessing information when they needed it. As one young person commented, "you want to ask a question now!...It's hard to wait". On the other hand it was considered that an advisor external to the school might be able to gain the trust of pupils more easily (Watts, 2001). The effectiveness of such a system relies on pupils having the self-confidence to make an appointment and to overcome self-consciousness in order to ask for help on a topic about which, almost by definition, they are unclear. Some participants were unsure about how they could get to see an advisor at all. This reflects confusion on key issues such as the relationships between Personal Connexions advisors, careers advisors and tutors as well as in the extent to which schools have latitude to shape careers services (ibid). The following comments are illustrative of what young people had experienced and felt about careers guidance:

*I told her I was interested in travel and she gave me some leaflets.*

(female)

*We had to fill in a form on what job we will take. She [careers advisor]*

*tells you about colleges and that. I'm not sure how you see her. (male)*

*I don't want to see an advisor. They only try to talk you out of what you want to do. (female)*

The Connexions service was established in 2001 and, despite being intended to cover the needs of all young people, it was given a specific target to reduce by 10 per cent the number of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training. Evaluations have since shown that schools and colleges did not have the capacity (or sometimes the willingness) to provide guidance to the majority of young people not 'at risk' to enable them to make appropriate decisions about their post-compulsory options (Morris et al, 2001). The National Audit Office (2004) reported that in nearly two thirds of the 580 schools they surveyed, careers guidance was being delivered by staff without formal qualifications for the role, and that over half of the schools said they were unable, due to time pressures, to find space within the curriculum for careers education lessons.

Careers evenings, where available, were evaluated more positively. In one case an event was part of a parents' evening, which meant that parents could gain information at the same time as their children. Overall, however, the young people from the eight schools in the study had experienced no effective attempt to inform them about apprenticeships and the opportunities they afford. From the perspective of gender, apprenticeships and occupational choice, the limitations in young people's experience of careers information and guidance in schools are a major concern. The lack of reliable and readily available information increases young people's perception that



entering the world of work is difficult and 'risky' because they are not sure what they are letting themselves in for.

Our survey of young people included statements suggestions ways in which it could become easier to overcome gender barriers to segregated occupations and asking young people to comment on them. Two thirds of girls (66%) and slightly less boys (54%) indicated that they would be tempted to train for a job normally done by the other sex if there was more information about the type of work they would do. Asian/Chinese girls were slightly less willing (61%) whereas Asian/Chinese boys were more willing (62%) than their peers to consider such an option. Encouragement by other people was also considered as a factor in making non-stereotypical decisions but this seemed to be more important to girls (64%) than to boys (43%). There was hardly any variation across the responses from different ethnic groups on this statement.

## **Conclusions**

There is a strong tradition of enquiry into young people's post-school decision making in the UK, driven partly by the continued sharply defined separation of the so-called academic and vocational pathways and by the continued existence of a terminal examination at age 16. The work of Evans (2002), Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) and Hodkinson et al (1996) has highlighted the way in which young people's lifecourse trajectories do not follow the deterministic, linear model envisaged by policy makers, but, instead, revolved around a series of 'turning points' causing changes in direction and aspiration due to changes in social, economic, educational and personal circumstance. The empirical study for the EOC provided an opportunity

to contribute to the literature by exploring a range of issues related to how teenagers in England are constructing their post-school identities in relation to the labour market. As well as providing insights into their decision-making, the study also revealed the absence of an adequate support system to assist young people as they formulate potentially crucial perceptions of the merits of the alternative routes open to them. In addition, and importantly for this paper, the study has shown that girls and boys from different ethnic backgrounds are finding it very difficult to conceptualise their employment futures other than in very traditional (perhaps even ‘safe’) ways, and that their current educational experience provides no opportunities for challenging stereotypical conceptions of male and female occupations.

There are a number of reasons why these findings matter. Firstly, labour market segregation (by gender and race) has a direct impact on rates of pay, opportunities for progression, access to training and further education, and job satisfaction. In terms of apprenticeships, the concentration of females in the level 2 pathway means that girls need to be aware of the consequences of entering sectors such as hairdressing, early years, health and social care, and retail. As Probert (1999) argues, labour market segregation has an impact on the access women have to opportunities for work-related and further learning. The “under-valuing of women’s learning in feminised occupations and industries”, and the “consistent pattern of task-specific training over career development learning”, means that they will struggle to gain rewards for investing in their own human capital. (ibid:112) The discourse of lifelong learning offers the promise of such rewards, but the reality of the workplace presents a much more restricted prospect of advancement.

Secondly, the findings matter because they reveal a conservative approach by young people to labour market possibilities, and their willingness to conform to stereotypical notions of what men and women should do. Rainbird (2000:186) reminds us that for many people, “the workplace is the site of tertiary socialisation, after the family and the education system”, a place where “workers learn to modify their performance to understand their roles, including their gender roles, in the structure and interactions of the organisation”. For girls and boys as young as 14 and 15 to have accepted, seemingly so firmly, the segregated status quo shows a woeful lack of any attempt to provide them with the critical tools and practical information required to even consider for one moment that it might be worth considering alternative visions of the future.

Thirdly, the findings reveal that no attention has been given to the consequences of this lack of substantive and challenging careers education and guidance for young people from non-White backgrounds. Young people from ethnic minorities appear to have to rely on ‘official routes’ – rather than friends and families – for their labour market knowledge, and this may explain why they are less likely to choose apprenticeships and work-based training programmes.

That the UK’s apprenticeship programme reflects the segregated nature of the labour market in both the public and private sector should not be surprising given the voluntarist approach to labour market policies adopted by governments over the years. Whilst young people on their own are clearly not in a position to change this situation, the continued reluctance of girls and boys to enter non-stereotypical occupations further entrenches the reproduction of employment inequalities. At the same time, we

know that young people who remain in full-time education until the age of 21 or beyond will also have to face the stark realities of the labour market. We would argue that, because good quality apprenticeships can provide a strong platform for lifelong learning and career progression, young people need much more detailed information about how to compare a work-based pathway with full-time education. At the same time, they also need to understand that apprenticeships (and jobs more generally) in some sectors may result in very limited opportunities for career advancement.

Our findings show that much work needs to be done to ensure that young men and women, regardless of educational attainment and class background, are properly informed of the consequences of embracing a stereotypical vision of their employment prospects.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) divides qualifications into five levels: level 2 is seen as a measure of employability and the level that should be reached by the end of compulsory schooling at age 16; level 3 equates to intermediate/technical skills.

<sup>2</sup> The UK Labour government dropped the label 'Modern' in September 2004 when the research reported in this paper was getting underway. The government-supported programme is now referred to under the umbrella term 'Apprenticeships', but is divided into two levels: 'Advanced Apprenticeships lead to level 3 qualifications; and 'Apprenticeships' lead to level 2 qualifications. As the term 'MA' was used in the research study and is still in common parlance, we have retained it for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The local LSCs are government-sponsored organisations that fund education and training for those over the age of 16 (except those participating in higher education which is funded by a separate body). They are responsible for funding and monitoring the MA and other work-based programmes.

<sup>4</sup> In 2005, there were 261,189 young people aged between 16 and 25 in the apprenticeship programme.

<sup>5</sup> These young people are in 'Year 10' of their compulsory schooling.

<sup>7</sup> The Connexions (sic) Service was launched in April 2001 and substantially changed the delivery of advice and guidance to young people. Prior to Connexions, careers advisors from the local education authority managed Careers Service visited schools to hold careers interviews for all pupils in Years 10 and 11. Under Connexions, schools identify pupils in need of support and arrange for them to see a Personal Advisor or young people can arrange such interviews themselves. It is presumed that not all young people will need to see an advisor.

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