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# Apprenticeship Engagement Among Large Employers in Scotland

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Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements of  
Doctorate of Philosophy, Management

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June 2024



## Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisors Professor Melanie Simms and Professor Christopher Warhurst. The encouragement and guidance I have had from them since day one is something I am extremely grateful for. Conducting this work during the dark days of the pandemic was not always easy, and the support I received from my supervisors was pivotal in keeping me on track throughout. Mel has been consistently generous with her time. She also gave me two of the best single pieces of advice I have ever received, though I doubt she even realises this. Chris has always been on hand to offer guidance and encouragement, providing extremely detailed and helpful feedback on my writing, which allowed me to improve my work and develop as a researcher. I am exceptionally grateful for all they have done for me.

I wish to thank the team at Skills Development Scotland. From the conference events to the breakfast seminars, everyone I have encountered has been incredibly welcoming, kind, and supportive. Graeme Hendry deserves a particular mention, having patiently supported me in the background for 5 years now, always providing me with help whenever it was needed. I am similarly grateful to SGSSS.

I am very grateful to my colleagues in the management cluster at the University of Glasgow. The support I've had from people, even just in passing conversations, or in zoom meetings long ago, all helped me immeasurably. The feedback from the APR process was always incredibly useful and played no small part in shaping my work.

I want to especially thank Jeanette Findlay. I've told Jeanette this before, but long before we ever met, my first ever experience of Jeanette was listening to her on national radio, in an incident that led to a bout of controversy at the time. I then wrote an argumentative essay in my 4th year Modern Studies class in High School supporting her. Years later, we would come to meet through the Fans Against Criminalisation campaign, and we've worked together ever since. I don't know what I'd be doing with my life if it wasn't for Jeanette, but I know that without her support and belief, and the example she sets, I would never have dreamed of doing a PhD. Thank you for all that you have done for me and for our community.

I think it's important to acknowledge the role played by all my friends and family. I'm unsure how many will be keen to spend several hours of the finite time they have on this earth reading an academic study about apprenticeship engagement, but if any of you do, then thank you. I have my family to thank for helping to get me to this point in how they have each supported me in a variety of ways through the years. I have my friends to thank for keeping me sane throughout it all. I have our dog Millie, who is sadly no longer with us, to thank for the happiness she brought. I appreciate you all.

Finally, I need to thank my superhuman wife, Rebecca. I honestly do not believe that there can possibly be a more patient, thoughtful, kind, and considerate human being on the planet. No matter how much my work has inconvenienced our lives, as it has repeatedly, you've never once complained. Not when we struggled to get a mortgage as I lived off a stipend, not when I was stuck in the office every night of the week for months on end, and not when I worked on my laptop from the poolside in Porto or in the town square in Tarragona. I love you and I'll be forever grateful for the way you have supported me. You are a superstar.

This thesis considers apprenticeship engagement among large employers in Scotland, as there has been no significant academic research available on what drives apprenticeship engagement within the contemporary Scottish context. Additionally, there has existed a need to develop a theoretical approach to evaluating apprenticeship engagement as current literature is sporadic and disjointed. This work involved eleven qualitative case studies within large organisations across Scotland, consisting of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. A series of supplementary interviews were also conducted with a broad range of stakeholders including skills practitioners, learning providers, business interest groups, HR professionals, apprentices, and trade unions. The case study organisations were categorised using a typology developed by Bredgaard (2017) dependent on engagement with, and attitude to, apprenticeships. This served to advance understanding of what different types of employers exist in Scotland in relation to apprenticeship engagement and enabled the identification of key characteristics of employer behaviour within each category.

A critical realist data analysis approach was used which has allowed for some of the key structural forces and causal mechanisms driving apprenticeship engagement to be revealed and understood. It is found that committed employers, that engage with apprenticeships and hold a positive attitude toward them, are moved to engage as part of a long-term strategy. This approach is centred around either investment in workforce development, driven by labour market pressures, or around notions of 'giving back to communities', guided by ideas of corporate social responsibility. Sceptical employers engage with apprenticeships despite holding a negative attitude regarding them, and these organisations are generally private companies that engage as part of a short-term strategy, often to claim funding, meet immediate recruitment needs, or to conform to perceived industry expectations.

Passive employers do not engage with apprenticeships despite being generally positive about the concept because it is believed that the approach would not be suitable. This is a result of a limited understanding of available apprenticeship frameworks. These organisations also tend to be non-profit seeking, meaning that market pressures that might encourage engagement, for example to seek available funding or to hire staff on lowered apprentice wages, do not significantly influence decision making. Dismissive employers tend to prioritise flexible hiring practices, for example by utilising a temporary labour force or subcontractors. These organisations are likely to consider processes of deskilling and the lowering of labour costs and conditions where possible, and apprenticeships are generally viewed as a contractual commitment that would be incompatible with broader strategy.

In addition to demonstrating the utility of Bredgaard's framework within the context of apprenticeship engagement, it is proposed that the typology must be developed further to account for dynamic movement across the typology given that employer attitudes and engagement may change over time. It is hoped that the knowledge developed by this thesis will have practical application for practitioners and policymakers in the ongoing quest to improve the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunity available to people in Scotland, and that the theoretical contribution through the development of Bredgaard's typology will support further academic research on apprenticeship engagement across a variety of different contexts.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

### Introduction

The Scottish Government (2014) has committed to increasing the number of new apprenticeship opportunities available to people in Scotland over the last decade. Whilst there has been a noted increase in new apprenticeship starts in that time (Skills Development Scotland, 2022), it is still the case that less than one in five employers in Scotland choose to hire and train apprentices (IFF, 2021). Additionally, there has been a lack of academic research that has sought to understand the employer perspective on this matter. This thesis has been developed to improve upon current levels of understanding of what drives employer engagement with apprenticeships. The *Introduction Chapter* will provide an overview of the topic area, the intended research contribution and explain the key terms and scope of the project. Discussion is also provided explaining the historic, economic and labour market conditions that provide the contextual background to apprenticeship engagement in contemporary Scotland. A brief overview of the thesis is also provided as guidance for what can be expected across each chapter. The introduction concludes with an outline of the research questions that have driven this work.

### Topic

Helping young people to find employment, particularly within roles that require or help attain specific skills, knowledge, and qualifications, is important for society and has presented a significant policy challenge for nation states across Europe since the financial crash of 2008 (Lewis & Heyes, 2017). Apprenticeships are an important tool in creating opportunities for young people in such roles (Aivazova, 2013), particularly within western Europe where countries like Denmark and Germany (Ibsen & Thelen, 2020) have successful and popular apprenticeship frameworks that have contributed significantly to youth employment and training, as well as to the broader social fabric and economic strength of these countries.

Apprenticeships have also increasingly been understood as a suitable way to train and upskill older workers across the UK (Pember, 2018), broadening their appeal from a previous narrow historical focus as being solely the domain of younger people (Snell, 1996). Whilst some European economies have a strongly developed apprenticeship system with high levels of uptake among employers, the level of apprenticeship recruitment and participation in Scotland has been relatively low. As of 2020, only 19% of Scottish employers hired and trained apprentices, and of those employers, 63% hired only one apprentice (IFF, 2021). In addition to this, there is no academic research on apprenticeship engagement within the Scottish context that provides a thorough evaluation of employer behaviour as it relates to apprenticeships.

Over the last decade, the UK Government (HM Government, 2020) and the devolved Scottish Government (2014) have put apprenticeships at the heart of labour and employment policy, introducing legislation and other initiatives to increase apprenticeship engagement. This is seen most notably with the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017, however there have also been smaller scale state-led interventions such as the Adopt an Apprentice Scheme and the Apprenticeship Employer Grant. These initiatives have produced mixed results thus far, and it is worthwhile evaluating the effectiveness of such government interventions and to gain a deeper understanding of what is driving employer behavior.

If the aim of the state is to increase the level of employer engagement with apprenticeships, it is necessary to broadly examine the employer decision making process when organisations consider engaging with apprenticeships. To effectively work toward increasing the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities available to people in Scotland, particularly during a turbulent economic period, policymakers and practitioners must garner some insight into what profiles of employers exist in relation to apprenticeships, what drives these employers to engage with apprenticeships, and what factors may dissuade them from doing so. However, existent literature on apprenticeship engagement does not offer a clear theoretical framework through which employer engagement can be understood.

This thesis was designed with these problems in mind.

A typology was identified, initially created by Bredgaard (2017), that categorises employers based on engagement with, and attitude to, active labour market policies. This framework has been used within this research to advance understanding of how and why employers engage, or do not engage, with apprenticeships in Scotland, and to evaluate the utility of the framework itself as a potentially useful tool for researchers and practitioners concerned with apprenticeship engagement. Eleven case studies and a range of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders have been undertaken to these ends. The research has also sought to identify the key motivating factors, causal mechanisms and structures that shape attitudes and drive behaviours in relation to apprenticeships among large employers in Scotland. By testing the utility of a conceptual framework, and by examining and advancing understanding of what drives employer behaviour through this lens, this thesis develops theory in a way that is advantageous for researchers interested in employer engagement with apprenticeships, and simultaneously expands knowledge in a way that has meaningful practical application for policymakers, skills practitioners, trade unions and employers to support the bid to ensure a greater quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunity can be made available to people in Scotland. The contributions made are detailed further below.

### Research Contribution

This research expands on existing knowledge relating to apprenticeship engagement in Scotland to help support academics, practitioners, and policymakers to improve the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities available to people in Scotland. There are two specific ways that this project achieves this; by utilising and developing Bredgaard's typology (2017) to categorise employers to further understanding of employer engagement, and by identifying the motivating factors, structures and causal mechanisms that drive the way that large employers in Scotland perceive and engage with apprenticeships. This

subsection will concisely explain the value of the research that has been undertaken.

### *Broaden Understanding: Apprenticeship Engagement*

There is a broad and extensive literature that evaluates apprenticeships. One can locate literature that discusses and critiques national apprenticeship policies and programmes (Walden & Troltsch, 2011; Oliver, 2010; Meredith, 2011; Valiente, Jacovkis & Maitra, 2021; Fortwengel, Gospel & Toner, 2021), as well as work that sets out a case for the best practice in developing a model apprenticeship framework (International Labour Organization, 2023; Smith & Kemmis, 2013).

There is also available research that analyses employer motivations for engaging with apprenticeships, (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018; Quigley, 2019; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner, 2010; Chankseliani & Anuar; 2019), though each of these studies has its own limitations and further work is required to better understand employer behaviour.

There has also been a specific dearth of information on how and why employers engage with apprenticeships in contemporary Scotland. Bajgar and Criscuolo (2018) have produced interesting work on how modern apprenticeships might be evaluated in Scotland, Greig (2019) demonstrated what factors impact apprenticeship completion rates in Scotland, whilst the OECD (2020) conducted a wholesale report on strengthening the Scottish apprenticeship system. However, despite the knowledge developed by such work, there is a distinct need to develop a deeper understanding of the employer perspective within the Scottish context.

The drive to improve upon current levels of understanding has been explicitly linked to the need to provide practical support to policymakers and practitioners in their quest to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities available in Scotland. This has been an explicit motivation behind the formulation of this project, as this research was partly funded by Skills Development Scotland (SDS) on that basis. SDS is the Scottish Government's skills body and is responsible

for developing and managing apprenticeships on the government's behalf. SDS opting to fund research on employer engagement with apprenticeships demonstrates that it has been recognised by skills practitioners in Scotland that there has been a need to improve upon understanding of employer behaviour in this regard.

The academic research that has been conducted previously on apprenticeship engagement across different contexts has generally focused on the motivation for employer engagement, and most of these studies have been solely quantitative, often providing limited insight into the deeper interests and desires of employers. There is also limited research that considers what factors dissuade or prevent apprenticeship engagement, and there is no notable peer-reviewed study that conducts a high number of in-depth interviews intended explicitly to help develop understanding of the decision-making process when employers are considering engaging with apprenticeships.

This research therefore goes further than previous work by utilising thorough case studies of employers and 60 in-depth interviews. Moreover, data gathered have then been analysed from a critical realist perspective through a careful 3-step process intended to not just describe *what* is occurring on the surface, but beyond this to demonstrate understanding of what drives such phenomena from beneath the surface, in essence beginning to explain *why* these events occur. This work therefore provides an examination of what structural factors and causal mechanisms shape apprenticeship engagement, and perhaps most importantly, helps to determine what might inspire *change* in employer behaviour. In doing this, the thesis provides tangible, actionable information that can help practitioners in their quest to change the behaviour of employers to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities available to people in Scotland.

*Theoretical Contribution: Developing Bredgaard's Typology (2017)*

The other key contribution of this thesis is theoretical. Within the literature on

employer engagement, there exists a range of theoretical frameworks utilised by researchers (Snape, 1998; Van Der Aa & Van Berkel, 2014; Martin, 2004; Nelson, 2013), however within the literature on apprenticeship engagement, there is no discernible appropriate framework that has been used to evaluate employer behaviour. This partly contributes to the sporadic approach taken to understanding and evaluating apprenticeship engagement in academic research. This thesis tests the utility of Bredgaard's typology (2017) as a framework for analysing, evaluating and better understanding employer engagement with apprenticeships. The reasons for choosing this typology are clearly outlined within the *Literature Review*.

Prior to this work, it is important to note that Bredgaard's typology had not been thoroughly tested, thus it is significant that this thesis examines its efficacy by using it in a different context to Bredgaard within his initial research. Additionally, this thesis argues that Bredgaard's typology can be developed further, contending that whilst there is utility in the framework as originally presented, it only provides a snapshot in time of employer types, but that there is further value to be found in understanding employer change and movement within the framework. This thesis uses case study examples to demonstrate that the framework can be altered to consider such movement, which then allows the framework to understand what drives change in employer engagement in a way that has practical utility within this context. This may also prove useful in other contexts of employer engagement with apprenticeships, and potentially for employer engagement with active labour market policies more broadly. With the benefits of this form of research demonstrated, it is important now to clearly define the terms and scope of the project.

### Terms and Scope

In introducing this thesis, it is important to provide definitions of pertinent terms and to clearly set out the parameters of the work being undertaken. It is also necessary to explain the reasons for these parameters and to provide justification for the decisions taken in the construction of this thesis. This section will set out

below precisely what is meant by each key term before explaining what the parameters of the thesis are, and why this is the case.

### *Apprenticeships*

To understand what is meant by an apprenticeship in Scotland, it is important to first examine the etymology of the word ‘apprenticeship’, especially given that the definition of the term has changed over time. Lancy (2012) helpfully outlines the historic context, explaining that the academic literature on the definition of the term ‘apprenticeship’ is difficult to follow, largely because researchers have often used the term too broadly, using it to describe any form of learning where a less experienced person learns from someone of greater skill or experience. The correct application of the term, however, refers to a much more formal arrangement. Historically, apprenticeships were defined by a master-apprentice relationship, with a young worker learning at the foot of an experienced tradesman (Markowitsch & Wittig, 2020). Lave and Wenger (1991) framed the apprenticeship as representing a journey, whereby the apprentice gradually would go from develop from being a novice to becoming an expert. Another key defining aspect of the traditional apprenticeship was that learning took place internally within the master’s place of work. Over time however, that reliance on mentorship was eroded, to be replaced with the ‘principle of duality’, meaning a mix of formal or classroom learning, occurring in a separate environment, combined with on-the-job experience (Field, 2018).

Markowitsch and Wittig (2020) contend that the other significant change found with apprenticeships is that the very purpose has shifted. Whilst apprenticeships were once understood as a very specific type of programme designed to qualify skilled workers, ensuring competence in a chosen trade, the definition has come to be used more broadly in some countries to refer to any structured combination of on-the-job experience, formal learning, and an apprenticeship contract. In this instance, neither the pedagogical framework, the skill level, nor the relation to a professional body or community defines the apprenticeship, but rather it is the

employment status enshrined in a formal contract that makes a working arrangement an apprenticeship. The outcome is that in the past a relatively small number of trades being taught in a very specific way qualified as apprenticeships, but now a much wider range of job roles, taught using a more flexible array of learning techniques, across a broader range of sectors and industries, are now termed as such.

In Scotland, apprenticeships have been understood as a clear route into specific jobs, particularly in industries that have a strong tradition of apprenticeship training (Hartkamp & Rutjes, 2001). James and Keep (2011) present evidence that apprenticeships were strictly defined in Scotland until 2009, and the term was applied exclusively to higher level provisions, like apprenticeship frameworks found in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland (McNally, 2018). This allowed apprenticeships to maintain a relatively strong level of occupational prestige (James and Keep, 2011), meaning that they imbued a high-level of respect, credibility, and social capital to people in these roles (Camargo & Whiley, 2020). Those who participated in vocational education at a lower skill level with shorter learning periods tended to be classified as 'skill-seekers', rather than apprentices (James & Keep, 2011). This classification was later altered, and skill-seekers were brought under the apprenticeship umbrella, in theory to broaden the scope and appeal of all types of apprenticeship. This amalgamation of apprenticeships and skill-seekers it is argued also helped to prevent any competition between them (Campbell, McKay & Thomson, 2005). In recent years in Scotland, apprenticeship frameworks and programmes have expanded further (Evans, 2020) and a more modern definition of what constitutes an apprenticeship, as outlined by Markowitsch and Wittig (2020), now applies within the Scottish context. These shifts in purpose, delivery and perception are important to consider when seeking to define apprenticeships in the modern day.

Fuller and Unwin (1996) have contributed significantly to this theoretical discussion within academic literature, noting that the apprenticeship is an internationally recognised model of learning. It is also their contention that apprenticeships have traditionally served a functional role, to facilitate the



apprentice in learning a skilled trade, and a transformational role, in helping socialise young people into becoming adult workers. It is suggested then that there are three key dimensions to apprenticeships; the contractual agreement setting out the obligations between employee and apprentice, the cultural and social aspects that help socialise apprentices into the workplace, and the modes of learning, both formal and informal, that allow for the development of technical skill for the job at hand. This presents a comprehensive framing to understand apprenticeships conceptually, however given that this work has a strong policy focus, the definition of apprenticeships used must match the contemporary definition of apprenticeships utilised by policymakers, practitioners, and employers, with a strong emphasis on formal learning and contractual agreement.

Therefore, within the context of this research, apprenticeships are defined in line with Markowitsch and Wittig (2020) as formal working arrangements that combine work experience and responsibilities with external educational attainment of a formal qualification, underpinned by an apprenticeship employment contract.

With the definition made clear, it is then important to understand the types of apprenticeships and how these relate to that definition. In Scotland, there are 3 different types of apprenticeship available to people - Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs), Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) and Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) (Higginbotham, 2023). MAs represent the most traditional form of apprenticeship in Scotland, providing positions for people that offer a mix of classroom learning, typically with a local college or learning provider, and practical work experience, underpinned by an employment apprenticeship contract. These positions are often aimed at young people entering the workforce but can be held by anyone over the age of 16. GAs offer a similarly structured programme for apprentices, however the formal education element enables apprentices to work towards university level qualifications up to Masters level. FAs are designed for those still in Scottish secondary schools, meaning that these students would be aged between 16-18. These are an option for students to take in lieu of another ordinary school subject, meaning that they could spend one or two days each week learning in a workplace

environment rather than in the traditional classroom setting. Crucially, FAs are not underpinned by a contract of employment.

*This thesis therefore solely focuses on and considers MAs and GAs. Any further references to apprenticeships throughout this thesis will only relate to these forms unless otherwise stated. The reason for this choice is simply that MAs and GAs are formal paid positions underpinned contractually and FAs are not. The Scottish Government focus on improving apprenticeship participation is based around the desire to provide higher quality paid jobs (Scottish Government, 2020c), thus any study seeking to understand what might motivate employers to increase their engagement with apprenticeships must focus on paid apprenticeship positions.*

### *Why Scotland?*

Scotland operates in a unique and interesting position in relation to apprenticeships, particularly within a legislative context. Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, under the control of separate parliaments with differing remits for different policy areas. The central government of the United Kingdom has a broad policy remit and maintains control over areas such as constitutional matters, foreign policy, defence, immigration, trade and industry, equal opportunities, and employment (Scottish Parliament, 2023). Other powers have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament and these include law and order, housing, health and social services, local government, agriculture, sport, culture, and education.

Given that apprenticeships cut across both matters of employment and of education and training, the remit for apprenticeships is in a sense shared. The UK Government, which has responsibility for employment policy, is responsible for dictating legislation which relates to apprenticeships. This is most notably demonstrated with the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 (Powell & Foley, 2020), which also applies in Scotland. It is however the Scottish Government that manages the levy in Scotland, operating it in a notably different fashion to

that of the rest of the UK (Davidson, 2017). It is also the case that the Scottish Government has a responsibility for education and training, which it tends to manage through SDS, which is responsible for overseeing and managing the apprenticeship system in Scotland. The Scottish Government has made ambitious promises to increase the number of new apprenticeship starts across Scotland, and it was generally overseeing a successful increase before the COVID-19 pandemic halted some of this progress (Skills Development Scotland, 2022). It is also important to note that SDS has contributed half of the funding for this thesis, partly due to a desire to develop greater academic insight into what drives employer behaviour in relation to apprenticeship engagement, with the hope that this increased understanding can aid efforts to increase apprenticeship opportunity across the country. This knowledge it is hoped will have a tangible, practical impact for policymakers and practitioners.

Without that level of knowledge, decisions have been taken based on commonly held but often untested assumptions. For example, two Scottish Government interventions relating to apprenticeships came in the form of the 'Adopt an Apprentice' scheme (Skills Development Scotland, 2021) and the 'Apprenticeship Employer Grant' (Scottish Government, 2020b), both introduced at the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic. These schemes offered employers the opportunity to apply for a one-off grant if they hired either an apprentice who had been let go by another employer because of the pandemic, or if they hired a new apprentice within a specified period. Similar schemes were made available in England and other parts of the UK, but the amount of the grant was higher in Scotland than elsewhere. Scottish employers were able to apply for a grant of up to £5,000, and a £10m pot set aside by the Scottish Government to fund this was used to excess, with a top up required to meet the demand. In England a similar scheme was operated however the amount of money offered was less than that provided to employers in Scotland (Camden, 2020). It is fair then to conclude that given the significance placed on improving apprenticeship numbers by the Scottish Government (2014), and the fact that the response from the Government to the pandemic threatening this progress was to offer significant sums of money to individual employers to stem the tide, that the Scottish Government fundamentally

believes that the most effective way to motivate employers to engage with apprenticeships is through financial incentive, given it pursued this tactic in a moment of acute economic and social crises. That assumption may well have had some merit, but it had not been properly examined and researched. An improved understanding of these issues, derived from academic research, was therefore required within the Scottish context to ensure that future decisions are informed by evidence.

A key reason for the formulation of this research is that there has existed a specific need to understand employer engagement within a Scottish context. This need existed for three primary reasons. Firstly, Scotland has its own unique apprenticeship context that is distinct from the rest of the United Kingdom. Secondly, there has been no meaningful academic research done on employer behaviours and attitudes relating to apprenticeships within this distinct Scottish context. And thirdly, the Scottish Government and SDS remain fiercely committed to increasing apprenticeship engagement, though the absence of rigorous independent academic research on what drives employer behaviour and apprenticeship engagement has meant that interventions designed to increase engagement have been limited by this lack of knowledge.

This thesis develops an understanding of what structural issues and causal factors drive apprenticeship engagement in Scotland and how these relate to different types of employer. The research undertaken specifically relates to organisations that employ people in Scotland to the extent that they pay the Apprenticeship Levy in Scotland. These employers do not necessarily have to only employ people in Scotland however, and several case study organisations operate either across the UK, or across the globe.

### *Employer Engagement*

Employer engagement plays a significant role in the success of state level workforce development goals (Spaulding & Martin-Caughey, 2015). The term

employer engagement generally refers to the degree of interest and participation of employers in relation to a government policy or initiative organised by a government-funded agency (Van Berkel et al, 2017). This thesis will work off this broad definition. Put simply, employer engagement will be used within this work to describe how employers interact with apprenticeships, whether they choose to hire apprentices, and how many apprentices they hire. A detailed discussion of academic research and frameworks relating to employer engagement can be located within the *Literature Review Chapter*.

### *Large Employers*

This thesis focuses entirely on the apprenticeship engagement of large employers. In the UK, companies are deemed large under the Companies Act 2003 if they meet two out of three aspects of the set criteria; they have a turnover of more than £36m, they have a balance sheet total of more than £18m, or they have more than 250 employees (Deloitte, 2019). However, within the context of this thesis, the definition of a large business or employer will be simple - applying to employers who must pay the Apprenticeship Levy in Scotland. The Levy applies to those employers with an annual salary bill of £3m or over, and they must contribute 0.5% of this wage bill to the levy pot. The reason for focusing specifically on organisations that qualify to pay the levy is that one objective of this work is to broaden understanding of the impact of the levy, and this is felt most acutely by those who pay it. In Scotland, other employers have some access to levy funding, but large employers have been chosen because they both pay the levy and can use it. Every case study organisation therefore meets these criteria.

### Research Background

#### *Introduction*

This work has been undertaken from a critical realist perspective and was designed

to help identify the structures and causal mechanisms that drive apprenticeship engagement among large employers in Scotland. If such structures and mechanisms are to be understood, the broader context to apprenticeship engagement in Scotland is crucial. It is therefore necessary to evaluate the contemporary Scottish labour market and to identify the key issues that impact how employers recruit and retain staff in Scotland.

A brief historical overview is given on apprenticeships in Scotland and the Scottish labour market more broadly. Analysis is then provided on the issues deemed most relevant and pertinent to the contemporary Scottish labour market, and to apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. The issues deemed most significant are youth unemployment, the growth in numbers of graduates in Scotland, labour market polarisation, the rise of insecure work, and the impact of Scotland's ageing workforce on the labour market. These sections synthesise contemporary labour market issues with influential and relevant theories and concepts advocated by prominent labour academics. This helps to provide a comprehensive overview of the Scottish labour market and to frame the evaluation of data in upcoming discussion and analysis chapters.

### *History of Apprenticeships*

Apprenticeship systems are understood to have existed in some form in what is now Great Britain since the middle-ages (Mirza-Davies, 2015). Drastic economic and social change has occurred since this period, yet apprenticeships remain an important tool for skills development and economic growth. The role they play changed over time, from primitive beginnings, primarily involving experienced craftsmen schooling young men in the basic skills of ancient trades, to the complex frameworks that blend public and private interests to create thousands of apprenticeship positions across sectors and industries in modern Scotland. This journey of change is significant as it explains the history of apprenticeships and enables the current apprenticeship context to be better understood.

From the very onset of crafts and trades, fathers teaching their sons skills and techniques to enable them to develop their ability to sustain themselves and their families was both natural and commonplace. Experienced craftsmen would also often teach other young men as part of the earliest economic systems, and this developed into a more formal structure over time. Snell (1996) has written extensively on the history of apprenticeships in the UK and has noted that most historians interested in this field tend to break this history in to three important periods; the period of guild apprenticeships which lasted from the 12<sup>th</sup> century up until 1563, the period of statutory apprenticeships which occurred between 1563 and 1814, and then the period of voluntary apprenticeships which stretches from 1814 to the present day. The first of these periods enabled young men to learn trades and allowed experienced tradesmen to recruit cheap labour, with this process generally being managed at a local level. The guild societies held considerable sway at this time, and often managed the apprenticeships and helped weave the informal links which bound master and apprentice. Often the apprentice would live with their master as they learned their trade.

1563 brought sweeping change with the introduction of 'The Statute of Artifices', a pivotal Elizabethan enactment which included rules stating that masters could have no more than three apprentices at any given time, and that each apprentice would serve seven years in that role before being deemed to be fully qualified in their craft (Mirza-Davies, 2015). Though this was enacted prior to the Act of Union in 1707, this would still prove crucial for the shaping of Scottish apprenticeships as this law in essence created a national system of technical training (Humphries, 2006). By providing these formal universal standards, the groundwork was laid which ultimately developed and grew into our current apprenticeship system. This statute also served another role; it granted greater authority to the centralised state as opposed to localised councils, and implicitly sought to protect the existing hierarchies which existed within society by restricting the ability of most people to enter the most profitable roles and markets, making such positions the exclusive right of sons of masters and wealthy families (Snell, 1996).

The next period of change significant to the evolution of apprenticeships in the UK

came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Statute of Artifices which had forbidden the employment of non-apprenticed workers was repealed in 1814 (Cowman, 2014). This meant that both apprenticed and non-apprenticed workers were to be found in employment in the same trades. The practice of ‘clubbing-out’ also became much more prevalent. Whilst in the past apprentices had often left the family home to live with their master, this practice was becoming dated, and it became standard for apprentices to remain within their own family home and simply commute to their work each day. Apprenticeships played a significant role in the industrial revolution, helping to train people in the necessary skills for expanding industries and sectors (Humphries, 2006). It is from this point that apprenticeships became more recognisable to current understandings of the term. The Scottish Parliament was later established as a devolved power in 1999, and it assumed responsibility for the management of apprenticeships in Scotland among other policy areas (Scottish Parliament, 2023b).

### *Brief History of the Scottish Labour Market*

Knox (2011) offers a useful overview of the history of Scottish industry. This provides an important background to discussions around the current labour market and the role of apprenticeships in modern Scotland. The Scottish economy began the slow move from being a largely agricultural economy to an industrial one during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however it was not until around 1840 that there was a major growth in heavy industry, with iron, steel, coal, shipbuilding and railway building becoming increasingly important for the new economy (Whatley, 1997). It was in these industries where apprenticeships were prevalent in the early period of voluntary apprenticeships. There was also a significant growth in the service industry between the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, helping to birth the new Scottish middle class of teachers, nurses, typists, and clerical workers (Knox, 2011).

Following the end of the second world war, the number of blue-collar jobs increased in line with the expansion of the new welfare state. There was



significant growth in apprenticeships across the UK during this time (Fuller & Unwin, 2009). In this period, heavy industry was required to help rebuild infrastructure, but quickly global competition began to take its toll. A long process of de-industrialisation was set in motion (Tomlinson, 2016), and the traditional apprenticed trades would be heavily affected. Government intervention helped to support some of these industries between the 1950s and 60s (Rhodes et al, 2018) however concerns grew over low productivity, and economic growth remained slow moving into the 1970s (Crafts, 2017). Following Margaret Thatcher's election in 1979, de-industrialisation accelerated as the decline of heavy industry was managed whilst the economy was reshaped (Tomlinson, 2021). The Scottish labour market demand for apprenticed workers in heavy industry jobs fell off dramatically as financialisation took hold. Scotland's economy became characterised by a reliance on service sector roles in stark contrast to the manufacturing and production jobs that once epitomised work in Scottish industrial heartlands. Since then, there has been growing evidence that the Scottish labour market has become increasingly polarised, with a growth in white collar professional jobs and a simultaneous growth in low-paid service work. With that, there has been a decline in the mid-skilled jobs that traditionally required apprenticeships.

### *Labour Market Polarisation*

A report produced by the OECD (2020) evaluating apprenticeships and skill systems in Scotland has suggested that a lot of mid-level jobs once available have been 'hollowed out', with many of these roles being either diminished or eliminated. This is broadly what can be expected to be found in a labour market with a high level of job polarisation, which is often associated with a large-scale restructuring of employment (as previously discussed), resulting in an increase in both high skill and low skilled work, but with a major reduction in medium skilled positions (Bachmann, Cim & Green, 2018). Polarisation has a significant impact on the apprenticeship context given that many traditional apprenticeships have provided training, experience and qualifications for mid-skilled jobs (Lerman, 2013). Apprenticeships have therefore been significantly affected by shifting skills

requirements, with a range of different outcomes. Firstly, some skills and training may now be less relevant or obsolete because of technological development and industrial change. Some jobs have become deskilled, whilst others are no longer in demand in the modern Scottish economy. The decline of mid-skilled jobs has translated into reduced apprenticeship opportunities in some sectors, and there is a risk that this may worsen in some instances.

However, on a more positive note, job polarisation does facilitate new high skilled jobs, which has contributed to the development of high skilled apprenticeship frameworks and opportunities in Scotland. High skilled apprenticeships offer a unique avenue for individuals to acquire specialised skills and qualifications while earning a wage, aligning with the demands of the modern job market. The opportunity to develop such skills also presents a possible motivation for employers that seek such skills to engage with apprenticeships. Additionally, the changing nature of work has underscored the importance of upskilling and reskilling, and apprenticeships offer the opportunity for continuous learning and development for workers and employers to effectively adapt to the modern economy. As the economy and labour market continue to shift, and apprenticeships evolve to keep pace, it stands to reason that employer attitudes and behaviour in relation to apprenticeships will change too. Understanding job polarisation is therefore important to understanding apprenticeship engagement in contemporary Scotland. There are a variety of factors combining to drive polarisation, thus upcoming sections will provide a brief overview of the key concepts that underpin this phenomenon.

### *Deskilling*

The Scottish labour market has witnessed significant transformation due to the rapid advancement of technology amidst continual economic and social change. These developments have altered the nature of work and led to concerns about the deskilling of the workforce. Deskilling refers to the reduction in skill requirements for a particular job, leading to a potential decline in the overall skill

level of the workforce. The concept of deskilling was first made famous by Braverman (1974) in his influential book *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Braverman's contribution will be discussed further within the *Literature Review Chapter*, but it is worth noting at this stage that he suggested that employers would commonly attempt to break down jobs into tasks that require as little skill as possible, thus weakening the bargaining power of workers, allowing wages to be lowered and profits to increase (Devinatz, 2014).

Deskilling is also inextricably linked to automation, as technology is increasingly being used to replace workers in the process of production (Sutton, Arnold & Holt, 2018). Tasks that were once reliant on human skills are now being carried out by machines, resulting in the displacement of certain job roles and a subsequent shift in skill requirements. Automation can lead to a reduction in the demand for manual and routine tasks, thereby limiting the need for specialised skills in these areas (Autor, 2015). Technology and automation leading to the deskilling of work and polarisation within the labour market is not new, however. For example, we seen this occur in the UK in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the invention of the cotton machine removed a significant degree of skill required of workers in that industry, whilst simultaneously creating higher skilled jobs for workers tasked with designing, producing and fixing machines (Brugger & Gehrke, 2018).

There is evidence of deskilling having occurred across a range of job roles and industries within the Scottish economy, and trade unions fear that this could worsen (Scottish Government & STUC, 2018). Some Scottish employers pursue a low skills job model, offering little in the way of training or progression trajectory for staff (Sutherland, n.d), and evidence demonstrates that those with a low level of skill tend to be lower paid (Ahmed et al, 2022). The prevalence of low-quality jobs is an increasing problem (Skills Development Scotland, 2017) and these concerns have arisen parallel to heightening apprehensions that employers have decreased the level of training provided to staff over a similar period (Scottish Government, 2019). There have been instances of workers becoming involved in industrial disputes and protests in Scotland in response to management deskilling

policies (Stott, 2021; BBC, 2012) and the issue continues to inspire debate globally. Research suggests that 47% of jobs in the modern economy could be threatened by deskilling and automation (Frey & Osborne, 2013). This figure has been disputed by an OECD report (Arntz, 2016) that argues that such a pessimistic outlook does not properly account for the potential for technology to create new jobs and industries. Whilst that may be the case, there is certainly evidence of a significant threat to workers. In terms of apprenticeships, there are instances of deskilling impacting the shaping of available frameworks in Scotland. For example, the level of skill provision for apprenticeships offered in construction has been reduced in some respects because of technological advances that lowered the skill levels required to do certain tasks (Fair Work Convention, 2022). Concerns around deskilling are then linked often to concerns around job security.

### *Low skill, low security*

There has been a noted increase in insecure work in Scotland (Walker, 2019). A job is defined as insecure by the Living Wage Foundation (Richardson, 2021) if it is non-permanent, if it involves self-reporting volatile hours, or if it is a low-paid self-employed role. Insecure work is often linked to the gig economy, which is a term derived from the notion of a performer booking a gig, meaning that the performer will perhaps play a set for one night, or a series of nights, but the work is temporary, insecure, precarious, unpredictable, often short and devoid of some of the rights and protections afforded to permanent staff members (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). This model of work reduces labour costs for employers, often by deeming workers 'independent contractors', and is characterised by flexibility, shifting the risk and income instability from employer to employee (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). Critics of this model of work argue that it is exploitative, that workers often do not know their rights, staff pay is often arbitrarily deducted and the power dynamics facilitate bullying and abuse (Judge, 2018).

One particularly controversial manifestation of the gig economy is the rise of zero hours contracts, which is a type of employment agreement in which the employer

does not guarantee a minimum number of working hours to the worker. Within a Scottish context, zero hour contracts have been come under fierce attack from trade unions (Rafferty, 2019) and local campaign groups like Better Than Zero (Torres-Quevedo, 2021). Under a zero hours contract, workers are often considered to be ‘on-call’ but are only called in to work when there is a need for their labour, and they are paid only for the hours that they work. Zero hour contracts are typically characterised by no guaranteed hours, limited employment rights, variable hours and pay, and a high degree of flexibility, both for employees and workers. Whilst workers on zero hour contracts have the right to refuse work, most of the power in the relationship sits with the employer. Zero hour contracts and the associated poor working conditions have been a growing concern in Scotland, which has the highest proportion of zero hours contracts in the UK (Pooran, 2023). They are most prevalent in industries such as retail, hospitality and the health and social care sectors (Atkinson, 2022). These industries all have apprenticeship frameworks available, thus the degradation of work in these areas, and the option being available to employers to hire people on insecure contracts, poses a potential threat to apprenticeship engagement with these programmes.

There has also been a considerable rise in workers declaring themselves as ‘self-employed’ in Scotland in recent decades (Richmond & Slow, 2017). This means that an individual runs their own business or provides services as an independent contractor rather than being employed by a company or organization. In many instances, this sees self-employed people working as subcontractors or consultants for larger organisations, in the same way a permanently contracted employee might. This arrangement however does not have the guarantees associated with full-time, permanent work and thus can result in job insecurity, income instability and limited access to employee benefits, such as sick pay, paid annual leave and maternity/paternity pay. Self-employed workers in Scotland are disproportionately represented in jobs that have traditionally required apprenticeships in the construction industry and associated trades, such as bricklayers, scaffolders, electricians, joiners, plumbers, tilers, roofers, groundworkers and painter and decorators (Fair Work Convention, 2022). A significant amount of those who declare as self-employed choose to do so for tax reasons and for greater autonomy,

even if this lowers their wages and security (Scottish Government & STUC, 2018).

For the most part however, those operating in the conditions dictated by the gig economy in low-pay, insecure work do so not out of choice, but necessity (ibid). One particularly damning newspaper report refers to those operating within the gig economy and in precarious work as the 'shadow workforce', arguing that such conditions lead to 'ghost jobs and half-lives' (Chakraborty, 2015). Beck (1999) predicted that western nations would see working conditions undergo a process of 'Brazilinisation', meaning that working life would come to imitate working conditions found in a country like Brazil, with low pay, precariousness and job insecurity being commonplace. There has however now been a growing response to these conditions in discussions around fair work principles.

This was seen with the establishment of the Fair Work Convention in 2015, a group which includes prominent labour academics and trade unionists. The Fair Work Convention advocates for improved working conditions and advises Scottish Government Ministers on matters of employment (Fair Work Convention, 2016). The convention defines fair work as work that offers job security, respect, an effective voice for employees, fulfilment, and opportunity. The Scottish Government has formally adopted the Fair Work Framework and proclaimed that Scotland will be a leading fair work nation by 2025 (Scottish Government, 2022b), though there are suggestions that the soft regulation approach used has thus far struggled to improve the pay and conditions of workers (Cunningham et al, 2023). Findlay, Stewart, and Anderson (2021) have presented research that engaged with apprentices and employers showing that stakeholders are broadly supportive of the idea of embedding fair work principles into apprenticeship programmes, however there is some hesitancy among employers around commitments to paying the real living wage to apprentices because of training, administrative and supervision costs. The debate around fair work is likely to have a growing influence on the apprenticeship context in Scotland as time passes and as employers needs continue to develop, particularly in relation to skills.

### *Skill Shortages and High-Skilled Work*

Whilst previous sections have discussed the risk of deskilling, the other side of the coin with work polarization is in the increase of highly skilled work. Referring to the example given earlier when discussing deskilling in the UK cotton industry, the invention of the cotton machine may have deskilled the cotton trade, but it also gave birth to the cotton machine industry, creating high-skilled and relatively highly paid work for the time and the place (Brugger & Gehrke, 2018). Braverman (1974) may have painted a bleak picture of automation, and Beck (1999) of deteriorating working conditions, but it has been argued that technological development provides Scotland with an opportunity to increase productivity, drive innovation, improve learning and help develop a high performing, high skill economy (Scottish Council for Development and Industry, 2020). Building on the basic principles of human capital theory (HCT), Giddens (1998) argued that investing in education and training to upskill the population would help to create the high-skilled jobs people would be equipped to do. His work was heavily influential in encouraging governments to invest in training and education to tackle social problems (Gamarnikow & Green, 1999).

The Scottish Government (2022) takes the view that a skilled population is essential to economic growth, and this is important in response to ongoing technological change and the environmental need to transition to green energy sources. There has been a growth in jobs in new technological industries in Scotland (Newlands, 2021), requiring a high level of skill, often with good pay and conditions. Some apprenticeship frameworks, such as in Cyber Security and Data Science, demonstrate that apprenticeships are increasingly being shaped with this change in mind to attempt to meet the needs of employers, and provide high quality opportunities to people in Scotland. Social, as well as technological change, is also relevant given that Scotland has an ageing population and workforce, and with some industries and jobs being diminished or made obsolete, there is an increasing need for lifelong learning, and for people to be able to retrain and upskill at different stages of their working lives.

Despite the efforts made to support training and the development of skills within the population, there are some industries and sectors that are experiencing skill shortages, meaning that employers are finding it difficult to recruit and retain qualified and competent staff to do the jobs that they require. When this problem is felt acutely, it is likely to negatively impact the overall performance of the organisation (Richardson, 2007). In Scotland, this has developed into a significant problem, with research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2022) demonstrating that 41% of employers are struggling to recruit qualified candidates for vacant posts. Research by the Open University (2022) estimates that this problem is costing Scottish organisations £352m annually. It is understandably the jobs that require a high degree of technical skill and knowledge that are reported by employers as the most difficult to fill (CIPD, 2022).

There is a reported shortage of qualified staff working in IT (Taylor-Smith et al, 2019), specifically in cyber security (Robinson, McQuaid, Webb & Webster, 2021). In construction there is currently a dearth of qualified bricklayers, with 66% of medium and small businesses seeking bricklayers struggling to recruit for these roles (Lawani et al, 2021). This issue is threatening continued growth in the industry. There are reports of shortages of bakers (North, 2021), chefs (Dorsey, 2021), lawyers (Nicholson, 2022) and nurses (Maishmann, 2022). Skill shortages can be found in the traditional oil and gas industry (Camps, 2015) and in the growing renewable energy sphere (PwC, 2022). The UK Government list of skill shortage occupations for Scotland, which exists to help facilitate and incentivise visa applications from skilled foreign workers who work in occupations that are needed to boost the national economy, states the need for scientists, engineers, veterinarians, roofers, plasterers, carpenters, bricklayers, welders, IT technicians, and healthcare workers, among many others (UK Visas and Immigration, 2022).

Research conducted by the CIPD (2022) has demonstrated that 37% of employers respond to this challenge by seeking to develop the skills of existing staff, and 23% specifically seek to hire and train apprentices to develop the skills of the workforce. It is significant too that 24% of employers simply choose to lower recruitment standards to get bodies in the door. It is shown that whilst skill



shortages evidently present a significant challenge to industries and employers across Scotland, they also create an opportunity for a potential increase in apprenticeship engagement. There are other factors though that must also be considered when evaluating the apprenticeship context, including the other options available to young people when they leave school and seek to gain skills and qualifications to aid their future careers.

### *Graduate Growth*

Salvatori (2018) has written on the anatomy of job polarisation across the UK, noting that the increased number of graduates has played a significant role in this phenomenon. The discussion around university graduates in Scotland is pertinent both to the wider debate around skills, training, and qualifications in Scotland, but also to apprenticeship engagement. There has been a steady rise globally in the numbers of people attending university (Calderon, 2018), but as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, countries around the globe were reporting that graduate level jobs were being cut between 15% and 29% (Institute of Student Employers, 2020). In Scotland, a record number of students enrolled at universities in 2020-21, with an 8.6% overall increase compared to the previous year (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021). Just over 180,000 new students enrolled in Scottish universities whilst residing in Scotland, whilst in the same year just under 20,000 people started new apprenticeships (Skills Development Scotland, 2022). In 2022, the University of Glasgow accepted so many students that many of them were unable to find accommodation in the city, leading to advice being issued to those who had been unable to find residence to consider deferring or withdrawing from their studies (BBC, 2022).

Evidence demonstrates that the pandemic led to an increase in young people choosing training or education over work in Scotland, however there are a variety of reasons for continued growth in the number of young people choosing to go to university ahead of alternative options. Firstly, university fees for those undertaking their first undergraduate degree are paid for by the state in Scotland

(Student Awards Agency Scotland, 2023), when this is not the case across the rest of the UK. This naturally makes university a more appealing option in Scotland than if students were expected to pay tens of thousands of pounds each year for tuition (Sa, 2014), as they are in England, for example. No tuition fees for undergraduate degrees in Scotland is a significant point of difference comparative to other countries within the United Kingdom and this impacts the labour market and apprenticeship context in a way that is unique to Scotland. There is also evidence that in addition to the opportunity provided to people by free higher education, parental pressure often has a significant impact upon a young person's choice to go to university (Minty, 2021). This can come in the form of an unspoken assumption that this is what their child will do, or in the form of much more overt pressure to pursue higher education. Perceived increased employability and earning power are also key motivating factors driving young people to opt for a university education (*ibid*).

University graduates earn more than non-graduates across the UK, however the average earnings of graduates compared to non-graduates has decreased over time (Boero et al 2016) as higher education has expanded. 84.5% of Scottish graduates have accredited university with helping them to find employment after completion (Universities UK, 2023), however a significant number of Scottish graduates complain of being underemployed, with some finding themselves in low paid poor-quality work (CIPD, 2022b). 36% of young Scottish workers in total believe themselves to be over-qualified for their role (CIPD, 2021). Some Scottish students have demonstrated a growing concern that the earning potential associated with a university degree may not be worth the debt they could be burdened with (Minty, 2016), as even though tuition fees are covered by the state, many Scottish students will still take out student loans to cover living expenses whilst they study. Employers meanwhile often cite the need for potential staff to have already gained years of professional work experience when advertising new positions, which may hinder graduates who have not gained such experience if they have focused primarily on attaining educational qualifications (Pirog & Hibszer, 2021).

Overall, there are challenges and opportunities for apprenticeship engagement

when considering the continued growth of university enrolment in Scotland. The perceived social status and economic benefits of a graduate degree, combined with Scotland's free tuition for residents, act to encourage young people in Scotland to attend university. This is particularly true of the highest performing students. This makes it difficult for employers seeking to attract high quality applicants for apprenticeship roles, which may impact the decision-making process of some of these employers. However, the decline in the economic value of a university degree may convince some who would have opted to attend university to opt for a different path, whilst graduate apprenticeships offer people the chance to combine a university degree with the work experience that employers seek. The Scottish Government has prioritized ensuring that young people have options and opportunities (Stando, 2021), so that they will be at a lowered risk of falling in to temporary or long-term unemployment.

### *Youth Employment, Unemployment, and Inactivity*

In the face of economic change and job polarization, youth employment poses an ongoing challenge for the Scottish Government. Broadly speaking, youth employment has been a problem for European nation states for decades (Dietrich, 2012). High youth unemployment can correlate with higher levels of crime (Fougere, Kramarz & Pouget, 2010), poor mental health amongst young people (Thern et al, 2017) and increased social exclusion (Kieselbach, 2003). As the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the globe in 2020, and as widespread lockdowns began to impact national economies, it was quickly predicted that the pandemic was likely to disproportionately impact the employment prospects of young people in Scotland (Grant, 2020). The Scottish Government's equality impact assessment of Covid-19 then confirmed these fears (Scottish Government, 2021). During the first year of the pandemic, the percentage of people aged between 16 and 24 in unemployment grew by 3.6% (Scottish Government, 2021b). Research conducted during this time suggested that nearly 40% of young people in Scotland did not feel optimistic about future employment prospects (Murova, 2020).

*“This pandemic has hit us hard - especially our young people who are facing fewer opportunities. We must help this generation who have been caught so cruelly in the eye of the COVID-19 storm.”* Then First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon (Scottish Government, 2020b).

Amidst the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government made youth employment a key policy priority, making a commitment to the country’s young people in the form of the Young Person’s Guarantee (Stando, 2021). This guarantee aims to provide all young people in Scotland aged between 16 and 24 with the opportunity of a job, an apprenticeship, continued education, or training. Apprenticeships are often understood as an integral tool to combat youth unemployment and to help young people into skilled work (Aivazova, 2013), thus it is important to understand the youth employment landscape in Scotland when considering apprenticeship engagement. Recent data demonstrate that as of 2023, Scotland’s youth unemployment rate sits at 9.7%, compared to 10.4% across the rest of the UK (Scottish Government, 2023).

Youth employment in Scotland has consistently outperformed the rest of the UK over the last decade, only falling below the UK average in 2020 as the impact of COVID-19 took hold (Skills Development Scotland, 2022). Youth employment steadily rose from 2014 onwards reaching a high of nearly 60% in 2019, though this sharply decreased in 2020. Despite the decrease in youth employment, there was no correlating rise in youth unemployment in 2020, though there was a significant rise in youth employment inactivity (ibid). Whilst youth unemployment refers to young people who are without a job and actively seeking work, youth employment inactivity refers to those who are not in employment but who would not be able to take up employment and are not actively looking for paid work. This includes those in education or non-work-related training, as well as those deemed unfit to work due to illness or disability.

Data demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown restrictions created the social and labour market conditions that saw a sizeable proportion of young Scots move from economic activity to economic inactivity

(Scottish Government, 2023). This correlates with the SNP's Youth Guarantee, offering a range of opportunities to young people not exclusive to employment, and this has seen an increasing number of young people in Scotland choosing further or higher education, or other forms of training, as opposed to employment in the aftermath of the pandemic. Whilst this is not necessarily a concern in and of itself, increasing youth employment must remain a policy goal and this can only be achieved if employers are willing to offer young people more employment opportunities, with apprenticeships at the heart of this discussion. It is also important to note that even though much of the focus regarding apprenticeships is on younger workers, it is equally important to understand how the growing number of older workers also shapes the context for apprenticeship engagement.

### *Scotland's Ageing Workforce*

Scotland's workforce is ageing, meaning that the country has a growing number of older workers (CIPD, 2022c), and this is having broad repercussions for the labour market. This is a result of demographic change as the Scottish population is getting older on average. In 1993, 18% of the Scottish population was of pensionable age, whilst this figure was at 19% by 2018 and is predicted to reach 22.9% by 2043 (Scottish Government, 2021b). This is largely caused by the fact that people are living longer. Whilst men born between 1950-52 in Scotland had an average life expectancy of 64.4 years, and women of this period lived approximately for 68.7 years, men born in 2017 can expect to live on average to 77.1 years, whilst women have a projected average of 81.1 years (*ibid*). Older workers, defined as those over the age of 50, now make up a third of the Scottish workforce (Panglea, 2022).

There are many benefits for employers to having older employees, including their potential skills, qualifications as well as accumulated knowledge and experience, referred to as 'wisdom capital' by Vasconcelos (2017). There are also challenges that can arise from having older staff members. At an individual level, older employees are more likely to suffer from health problems that can lower productivity (Soderbacka, Nyholm and Fagerstrom, 2020). Employers must also

abide by equality legislation, ensuring that staff are not discriminated against based on their age, and make any reasonable adjustments to any facilitate staff who may have specific needs (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021). Whilst there is a perception that older workers may struggle with new technology, technology can also aid older workers by reducing the physical demands of their job (Mayhorn, 2012). Overall, employers tend to report positive experiences with older workers (Kumar & Srivastava, 2018), whom they generally believe to be a benefit to the organisation.

Perhaps the more significant challenge comes to employers at the strategic level in relation to workforce planning and talent management when a significant proportion of the workforce is older. If a company has a large percentage of staff that is approaching retirement, there is a risk that the wisdom capital acquired by those workers could be lost to the organisation without being adequately replaced. This concern is now motivating some employers to develop strategies to retain the knowledge of their older workers (Tauro, 2021). This can involve attempting to retain older staff with a package that suits their life circumstances (McEvoy & Henderson, 2012). Another approach taken by some is to strategically replace this generation of workers with a younger cohort that can learn from them before they leave the organisation. Previous research (Quigley, 2019) suggests that the ageing workforce and this exact dynamic is a major motivating factor for employers that are fully committed to engaging with apprenticeships in Scotland, though work by Fuller and Unwin (2003) has shown that apprentices have a role in both learning and teaching others in the workplace, suggesting a more reciprocal relationship than is recognised by some employers. Ultimately, the broader economic context, structural factors, and relevant conceptual issues all have potential to impact employer engagement with apprenticeships in Scotland, which is why it has been necessary to set these out.

### *Research Background Conclusion*

This section has outlined the key factors that shape the context for apprenticeship

engagement in Scotland. Understanding these issues has been deemed essential if one is to successfully grasp the motivations and drivers of employer behaviour in relation to apprenticeships within this context. These different issues combine to create both pressures and opportunities for employers, and how organisations respond to these factors has the potential to significantly impact upon apprenticeship engagement. Data gathered and later discussed has been analysed with this context in mind, which is why it has been crucial to set out within the introductory chapter. The upcoming section will now outline the chapters of the thesis to act as a guide and explain what will be found in the prose to come.

## Overview

The *Introduction Chapter* lays out the foundations of this research, explaining the importance and need for such work, outlining the key terms and scope of the project, and detailing both the format and intended research contribution. It then includes an explanation of the key historical and contextual factors that impact apprenticeships in Scotland, including an overview of the Scottish labour market. This background is critical to understanding the basis of this research.

*The Literature Review* provides critical analysis of existing literature and research available that is most relevant to apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework used as part of this work, explaining and justifying the decision to use Bredgaard's typology (2017).

The *Research Design Chapter* offers an overview of the approach taken by this project, explaining and justifying each methodological decision taken.

There is then the *Case Study Overview Chapter* which presents data relating to each case study, demonstrating how each organisation has been placed within the typology and explaining how each decision was taken.

There is then a chapter each that is dedicated to *Engaged Employers* and *Non-*

*Engaged Employers*. Within each section relating to specific employer types, demiregularities are identified, explained, and discussed to highlight the common characteristics found within each employer profile.

An *Other Influences Chapter* has also been included to consider additional themes that are important to apprenticeship engagement but that do not appear to relate to employer types. This also includes the description of data gathered that relates to government policies and initiatives around apprenticeships in Scotland.

The *Discussion Chapter* provides further depth of analysis, with full abduction and retroduction processes undertaken to reveal the structural forces and casual mechanisms that drive observable behaviour in relation to apprenticeship engagement.

A follow-up chapter, *Developing Bredgaard's Typology*, is included to contend that whilst the utility of the typology has been demonstrated, there is a need to develop it further to encapsulate employer movement across the framework quadrants.

Finally, the *Conclusion Chapter* summarises the key findings of the research, and specifically lays out what interventions may be most likely to induce increase apprenticeship engagement amongst each employer type.

### Summary and Research Questions

The introductory chapter has laid out the context and justification for this research. The Scottish Government has prioritised increasing apprenticeship participation in recent years, however there is little evidence available to support policymakers and practitioners in this endeavour. There is a lack of academic research that considers apprenticeship engagement broadly, and within Scotland specifically. This project tests the utility of a typology proposed by Bredgaard (2017) to demonstrate that a strategic research approach, underpinned by a



relevant framework, can both develop knowledge and provide a consistent research framework for future apprenticeship engagement research. Eleven case studies have been conducted within large employers based in Scotland, consisting of semi structured interviews and documentary analysis. Each case study organisation has been categorised within Bredgaard's framework dependent on its engagement with, and prevailing attitude towards, apprenticeships in Scotland. Data has then been analysed using a critical realist three-step approach to reveal the causal mechanisms and structural forces that drive the behaviour of each employer type.

The key research questions that guide the research are as follows:

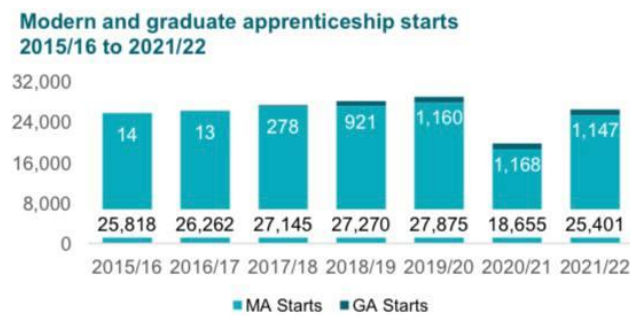
- Can the typology of Bredgaard be used as a useful tool to categorise employers in terms of apprenticeship engagement?
- Can the key causal mechanisms, structural forces and compelling motivating factors that drive apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in Scotland be revealed and understood?
- Is there a relationship between the employer types, identified through Bredgaard's typology, and the factors that drive apprenticeship engagement, that would allow for employer profiles to be developed?
- Can an evidence-based inference be made as to what interventions may improve the attitudes and engagement levels of each employer type with regard to apprenticeships?

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

### Introduction and Engagement Levels in Scotland

The academic literature available on apprenticeship engagement is sporadic and disconnected. There is no clear consensus on what researchers should focus on when attempting to measure or explain apprenticeship engagement, nor on how this research should be conducted. Most relevant available research tends to focus on evaluating one of either engagement levels, motivations for engagement or attitudes towards apprenticeships. Other work has sought to measure the quality of engagement, for example by focusing on the relationship between employers and colleges (Relly & Laczik, 2022). The most comprehensive work available has been provided by government-led research, focusing largely on motivating factors for employers, which whilst valuable, does not provide an in-depth critical analysis of how structures, forces and motivating factors drive employer decision making. There has been an overall lack of independent academic research on the factors that drive apprenticeship engagement, as well as a specific dearth of research relating to apprenticeship engagement within the Scottish context. This section of the literature review provides critical analysis of available apprenticeship research, highlighting what useful information can be gleaned from existing contributions whilst also noting where knowledge has been insufficient to allow a full understanding of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland.

In engaging with available literature and government reports around apprenticeships in Scotland, it is quickly apparent that the Scottish Government has been extremely keen to increase apprenticeship uptake. This is seen in the ambitious targets that have been set around new apprenticeship starts over the last decade, with the policy aim that by 2020, 30,000 apprenticeships would have been undertaken each year in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2014). Apprenticeship uptake increased year on year in the lead up to 2020, however the target was not reached, which the government argued was due to the economic disruption related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bol, 2021).



Graph 1. (Skills Development Scotland, 2022)

An OECD (2022) report has assessed the strength of the Scottish apprenticeship system and reported broadly positive findings, noting a 10% rise in apprenticeship uptake between 2013/14 and 2019/20. The report is also quick to acknowledge the positive outcomes of apprenticeships in Scotland, with 90% of former apprentices finding themselves in employment 6 months after completion. Whilst uptake of apprenticeships has increased over the last decade in Scotland, the OECD notes that only 16% of Scottish employers hired apprentices at the time of publication, though this rose to 19% by 2021 (IFF). This percentage range is comparable with other countries within the UK but represents a significantly lower level of engagement than is found in countries like Germany or Switzerland. The OECD (2020) partially attributes this to a lack of incentive for employers to engage with apprenticeships or play an active role in their governance.

SDS engages with employers through the SAAB (Scottish Apprenticeships Advisory Board), which provides an opportunity for employers to actively shape and manage apprenticeship frameworks (SAAB, 2020), so there is a need to better understand what might better incentivise employers to participate. SDS publishes regular reports on apprenticeship statistics, and these coupled with the OECD (2020) analysis of available data provide a meticulous depiction of the level of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland, but there is a need to move beyond that to understand what drives employer behaviour.

## Employer Motivations and Decision Making

The most common focus of research on employer behaviour as it relates to apprenticeships centres around employer motivation. The available research on employer motivation for engaging with apprenticeship tends to be quantitative, which helps with the generalisability of findings, but it also means that the level of depth and nuance required to dig beyond the surface level to understand what drives apprenticeship engagement is consistently missing. There are four particularly significant pieces of research that are important to understanding apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. Each of these is conducted in a similar way and all seek to understand what factors motivate employers to either engage or not engage with apprenticeships. These are published in the form of reports, and all have been commissioned by a government department or body. There is the Apprenticeship Employer Survey (Skills Development Scotland, 2020), the Scottish Employer Perspectives Survey (IFF, 2021), the Apprenticeships Evaluation 2021 (IFF, 2022) and the Employer Skills Survey: Apprenticeships and Traineeships (IFF, 2020). The Apprenticeships Employer Survey was conducted by SDS, whilst the other three were carried out by IFF, a prominent research consultancy, on behalf of the Scottish Government and the UK Government Department for Education respectively. These reports allow consistent themes to be identified and some important motivating factors to be recognised, but there are also common deficiencies that limit the strength and utility of the findings.

Data was gathered for these reports using quantitative surveys. Quantitative surveys are useful for collecting data from a large sample that may represent the views of a broader swathe of the population (Mullinix et al, 2016) however they do not allow for a great deal of nuance or the thorough examination of an issue in the way that a qualitative interview might (Dunwoodie, Macaulay & Newman, 2022). We see this manifest in these four examples, where there are helpful generalisations made available through key findings but without any of these reports providing a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of the key causal mechanisms and structural forces that drive apprenticeship engagement and employer behaviour. There are similarities in how the research has been conducted across

these four reports however there are important distinctions within each individual publication. It is important then to discuss and critique the approach taken by each report before then evaluating the key findings around employer motivation and apprenticeship engagement.

The first of these research reports considers employer motivations in Scotland and was carried out by SDS (2020). The Apprenticeship Employer Survey explores employer views, attitudes, and uses of apprenticeships in Scotland, consisting of 2,557 telephone interviews with employers who have either employed Modern Apprentices or taken on Foundation Apprentice placements. When evaluating employer motivation for engaging with apprenticeships, 2,410 employers that had engaged with MAs were asked the factors that encouraged them to decide to engage. This was done by providing a prepared list of potential motivating factors, and employers would select 'yes' if they felt that a given factor played a role in the choice taken to engage. There are some problems with this approach. Firstly, the pre-determined list of factors may have restricted the respondents and prevented issues or factors being raised that may not have been considered by the researchers. The other problem is that whilst the report outlines what reasons are cited most frequently by participants as influencing apprenticeship engagement, there is no evaluation of how influential these factors are. Employers were empowered to select as many factors as they wished that they claim impacted engagement, but if several factors have been selected, it cannot be possible to tell which factor, or factors, are most significant in driving engagement.

For example, 52% of respondents to this survey claim that they were motivated to engage with MAs at least partially to reclaim funds used on the Apprenticeship Levy, which was introduced in 2017. The number of new start apprentices in Scotland rose between 2017/18 and 2018/19 by 768 additional apprentices (SDS, 2022), which represents a respectable annual raise, but these figures do not provide evidence that a significant number of Scottish employers were driven to engage by the levy. Additionally, apprenticeship engagement later dropped to a level lower than it was prior to the introduction of the levy in the period since the Apprenticeship Employer Survey was conducted. It seems unlikely then that 52% of

Scottish employers were driven to engage with MAs by the levy in 2020. The evidence instead suggests that the survey design has encouraged respondents to select perceived benefits of engaging, rather than factors that actively drive the decision to engage. Additionally, no consideration is given at all within this report to organisations that do not engage with apprenticeships.

The Scottish Employer Perspectives Survey (IFF, 2021) provides much more focus on non-engagement however, conducting a survey of 735 Scottish employers that do not engage with apprenticeships. Participants were phoned and asked what factors influenced the decision-making process. The answers were unprompted, and respondents could list as many reasons as they wished to. This approach therefore did not restrict participants with a pre-determined list of factors, however there was once again difficulty in capturing the nuance required to understand employer motivations and decision-making processes with the chosen research approach. Again, if participants can list more than one reason for the decision they have taken, and researchers do not press for further detail, it is not possible to ascertain which reason, or reasons, are the most significant in driving employer behaviour.

For example, 13% of respondents have claimed that they do not engage with apprenticeships because they are not available within their industry. There are apprenticeships available across a large swathe of Scottish industry, as well as apprenticeships available in core function roles that would be appropriate and actionable across almost all sectors, including in management, facilities, computing, administration, and customer service. It is likely that of that 13% that claimed unsuitability as a key factor, some respondents would either have been unaware of the diversity of apprenticeship frameworks available, or may have been unwilling to reveal the real reason for organisational non-engagement. To truly understand employer motivation and how this influences organisational decision-making, a researcher would need to be empowered to dig beneath the surface of these responses. There is no data available on organisations with a long history of apprenticeship engagement within this publication, however the report does seek to consider the reasons why organisations that have only recently begun

engaging with apprenticeships decided to do so. This effort however is impacted by the same limitations of the research methods.

Of the final two surveys, 'The Apprenticeships Evaluation' (IFF, 2022) was commissioned by the UK Government Department for Education and considers employer motivations relating to apprenticeships across the UK, except for Scotland. The Employer Skills Survey: Apprenticeships and Traineeships (IFF, 2020) was also commissioned by the Department for Education but focuses solely on employers in England. It is important to note that the conditions for apprenticeship engagement across other parts of the UK differ in some ways from the Scottish context, most notably because apprenticeships are managed in a different way, with distinct Scottish frameworks and a separate funding system in Scotland, managed by the Scottish Government and SDS. This means that assuming all the factors found within the non-Scottish reports will impact Scottish employers in the exact same way would be ill-advised. However, because of broad labour market similarities and the shared legislative framework set by the UK Government, a careful analysis of the latter two reports is still potentially helpful for understanding Scottish employer behaviour, as some factors are likely to impact Scottish employer decision making in a similar way to other employers across the UK.

What can be found though within these two non-Scottish reports are the same limitations of quantitative surveys identified in the Scottish-based research. Participants in each were once again asked to list the factors that influence their decision to engage or not engage with apprenticeships, but with no means of evaluating the level of influence or impact of each factor. Additionally, the approach taken over-simplifies the relationship between employer motivations and employer behaviour. Employers may simultaneously be encouraged to engage by some factors and discouraged by others. It is also possible that respondents may not be consciously aware of structural forces that form perceptions and choices that drive organisational decision making.

Across all four of these publications the required level of nuance is not accounted

for. Despite this, there are important themes that can be usefully identified through these pieces of research. There are some conclusions that can be drawn about which broad factors are likely to influence employer engagement with apprenticeships in Scotland, but the limitations of each study prevent definitive claims being made about the extent to which each factor drives engagement, and how these factors really influence employer attitudes and behaviour. It is important to discuss and evaluate these themes and factors, but with the understanding that more work must be completed to reveal the true structural forces and causal mechanisms driving apprenticeship engagement in Scotland.

There are four significant broad themes that can be drawn from these reports that are the most prominent and consistently cited factors by employers that have motivated the decision to engage with apprenticeships. There are another two themes identified that are cited less consistently, thus may appear less significant in influencing employer decision-making processes, however these factors remain worthy of consideration and analysis. The four most significant apparent motivating factors that encourage employers to engage with apprenticeships within these surveys are the desire to acquire talent, the desire to nurture talent, the use of apprenticeships for altruistic purposes and for financial reasons. The two other broad reasons identified relate to using apprenticeships as a tool to retain employees, and because of perceived norms and expectations within the industry.

A significant percentage of employers across all four surveys noted that the acquisition of talent was a factor in the decision to engage with apprenticeships. Within the SDS survey (2020), 70% of employers claimed they were motivated to engage with apprenticeships as this would improve the organisation's ability to attract staff, and 77% noted that apprenticeships would help bring new knowledge and skills into the business. Within the Scottish Employers Perspective Survey (IFF, 2021), 58% of respondents that had begun engaging with apprenticeships within the previous three years were motivated to do so to acquire talent. This figure was at 58% within the Employer Skills Survey (IFF, 2020) across the rest of the UK, which asked the same question of employers that had also recently started to engage



with apprenticeships.

The organisational aim to utilise apprenticeships to acquire talent is tied to the intent to engage with apprenticeships to nurture talent. There are some responses within the survey data that could be considered as potentially relating to both. For example, within the SDS report (2020), 86% of employers claimed that they engage with apprenticeships partly to upskill staff, and 71% chose to engage with apprenticeships over other forms of learning for succession planning purposes. In England, 18% of employers chose to engage because of the appeal of using practical and vocational training (2022). These responses could be referencing the development and progression of new staff or existing staff. There is also clear evidence however of employers explicitly looking to develop skills and talent within the existent workforce. The Scottish Employer Perspective Survey (IFF, 2021) presents evidence that 17% of organisations that had begun engaging with apprenticeships in the previous three years done so to nurture talent, whilst that figure sat at 21% of recently engaged employers across the rest of the UK (IFF, 2020).

These responses indicate a broad organisational adherence to human capital theory (HCT), a concept associated with the work of Schultz (1961). At a base level, HCT contends that the staff of an organisation and their skillsets are understood as an asset, like other fixed organisational assets (Nafukho, Hairston & Brooks, 2004). Therefore, through recruitment and investment in training and education, the collective capital of this group can be developed and grown to ensure the organisation has a highly skilled group of workers who can ensure that strategic goals can be met, and that the organisation can be competitive on the global stage (Russell, 2013). From this perspective, apprenticeships can be understood as an effective way to recruit and train staff to ensure that the correct qualifications are held within the organisation and that organisational knowledge can be developed, transferred, and retained. Fuller and Unwin (2003) developed a framework detailing expansive and restrictive apprenticeships, ultimately arguing that employers should take an expansive approach to support apprentice learning most effectively. This approach involves developing a gradual transition to full

participation, enabling apprentice participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace, facilitating both breadth and depth of learning, and providing institutional support to develop a clear career progression plan for the apprentice beyond the period of their training.

There are some structural forces that may make the need to recruit, develop and retain skilled more acute for some organisations. For example, Scotland has an ageing workforce, as has been discussed within the *Introduction Chapter*. This has the potential to create a more urgent need for employers to seek to build a talent pipeline as part of their workforce planning strategy to boost the workforce long term. Older workers have accumulated wisdom capital (Vasconcelos, 2017) that may be difficult to replace if they retire. There are also fears that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the rate of employees retiring early (Boileau & Cribb, 2021). Employers are then faced with the challenge of seeking to retain older staff, or to train and recruit in a way that helps to ensure the skills and knowledge within their staff is not diminished when the older generation of workers leaves or retires. There is some evidence that suggests that employers understand apprenticeships as a means of managing generational change (Quigley, 2019). Findlay, Findlay and Warhurst (2007) have also demonstrated that trade union involvement in workplace training can have positive impact on the learning process, and it will be important to evaluate these different dynamics in greater depth within the contemporary Scottish apprenticeship context.

The third key theme identified within these reports shows that a significant proportion of employers that engage with apprenticeships proclaim to do so for altruistic reasons, mainly to give back to local communities by providing opportunities for young people to gain skills and enter the labour market. In Scotland, 92% of engaged employers proclaimed that a key motivating factor behind that decision was the chance to provide young people with employment opportunities (SDS, 2020). Of the Scottish employers that had decided to engage within the last three years, 24% claim to have been driven to do so in part due to altruistic motives (IFF, 2021). This is almost identical to the percentage of newly engaged employers across the UK, with 23% claiming to be similarly motivated (IFF,

2020). In England, 21% of engaged employers said that they were influenced to engage by the opportunity to help the local community and the apprentice they hired (IFF, 2022). This suggests that organisational adherence to corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a significant factor.

CSR is the notion that private companies have a responsibility not only to provide profit for shareholders, but also to have a positive impact in the communities in which they operate. This contention is also referred to as 'shared value' (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Hopkins (2014) defines CSR as when any organisation, private or otherwise, seeks to treat all stakeholders in an ethically responsible manner, contributing to a sustainable improvement in broad standards of living whilst achieving the stated goals of the company or institution. Agudelo et al (2019) provide a comprehensive account of the background to CSR literature, demonstrating that this concept has a long historical timeline, but that it really began to gain prominence with modern executives in the 1930s, before gradually becoming more clearly defined, with greater emphasis on developing strategy later in the century. Carroll (2016) produced an influential framework on CSR, noting that the broadly important areas of responsibility for corporations are economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. Today, CSR is central to organisations establishing a positive corporate reputation (Sanchez-Torne, Moran-Alvarez & Perez-Lopez, 2020) which is often pivotal in attracting consumers (Nickerson, Lowe & Sorescu, 2021). Evidence suggests that CSR also benefits organisations by boosting brand credibility (Hur, Kim & Woo, 2013). A strong degree of CSR can also lead to a strong degree value alignment within an organisation, meaning that the actions, goals, values, and processes are consistent and in harmony. This has a number of advantages (James, 2014), including that it can increase how workers identify with the organisation and their job, potentially increasing performance and outputs (Sullivan, Sullivan & Buffton, 2001).

A criticism of CSR however contends that the scope for genuine corporate responsibility is constricted by capitalist competition and class relations (Nunn, 2012), and therefore it often amounts to corporate marketing and strategic positioning rather than being a blueprint to ensuring that societal benefit can be

meaningfully coded into the workings of capitalism (Eren, 2012). Despite this tension, CSR remains a significant concept because many organisations demonstrate adherence to these principles. There is strong evidence found within data gathered for these four large surveys demonstrating that CSR can be a motivating factor that encourages employer engagement with apprenticeships. This is supported by other evidence too, for example, a study of Norwegian companies made it clear that because apprenticeships were broadly seen as an investment in human capital that would not just benefit the company, but also the industry and wider society, their continued engagement with apprenticeships was understood as tied intrinsically to their CSR strategy (Rusten, Grimsrud & Eriksen, 2020). A paper published by Szekely and Knirsch (2005) showed that the number of apprentice hires is often used as a metric of CSR by large organisations in Germany. The Norwegian and German apprenticeship contexts are very different to Scotland, but that suggests that CSR has the potential to be a motivating factor for apprenticeship engagement within entirely different environments.

The fourth reason provided by a significant proportion of employers for their engagement across these reports relates to financial incentives and motivations. This takes different forms and is expressed in different ways across the reports. The SDS report (2020) shows that 52% of Scottish employers engage with apprenticeships partly to make use of the apprenticeship levy, as was previously discussed. Of recently engaged employers in Scotland, 11% were motivated in part by broadly financial reasons (IFF, 2021), with this figure at 9% amongst similar employers across the rest of the UK (IFF, 2020). 7% of English employers engaged partly to reclaim the funds paid towards the levy (IFF, 2022). Additionally, the low salary and training costs for apprentices is considered by some employers as part of a cost-benefit analysis (McIntosh, 2007), but this can also lead to a form of exploitation.

There is evidence that suggests that some employers are not engaging with apprenticeships at face value, and that some examples of apprenticeship engagement can be characterised by exploitative practices or disingenuous categorisation intended to circumvent the recently introduced levy (Richmond,

2020). This can be understood as a form of organisational decoupling, a term derived from institutional theory, which contends that an organisation may appear to adopt a practice formally, but the reality of how this translates in practice differs considerably (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). One reason that decoupling can occur is that organisations face contradicting, and in some cases, irreconcilable pressures which cannot all be fully resolved.

How this level of disingenuous engagement with apprenticeships manifests can be broken down further into two approaches, the first of which relates to levy funding, which is discussed in further depth in upcoming sections. The second approach can be understood as being rooted in the exploitation of the apprentice. Put simply, there is evidence that suggests that some employers seek to engage with apprenticeships simply because they can pay apprentices less than regular full-time staff to do a similar job without any intention of offering adequate training or keeping them within their employ after their apprenticeship comes to an end, in some cases letting apprentices go only to employ a fresh batch of apprentices to repeat the cycle (Mohrenweiser, Zwick and Backes-Gellner, 2019; Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner, 2010; Fuller & Unwin, 2009). This is referred to as a 'substitution strategy'. In this instance, there is a fundamental disconnect between how an apprenticeship is expected to be managed, compared with the reality.

The employer in such an instance formally appears to be engaging with apprenticeships in good faith, but this perception is decoupled from the reality of how the employer manages the apprenticeship. By paying less in wages, the employer is seeking to increase the level of surplus value (Cartelier, 1991) extracted from staff members to increase their eventual profit levels, even if this is achieved by hiring apprentices on false pretences. There are historical examples of this dating back to the 19th century in Scotland (Walker, 1979), and research conducted on a form of apprenticeship called the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) in the 1980s demonstrates that many young people in Scotland felt that such schemes operated simply to provide employers with 'slave labour' (Walford, 1988). Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2008) note that decoupling is particularly likely to occur

in situations whereby an organisation is placed under pressure to adapt a new policy, and even more so when the organisation does not trust the source of this pressure, which in this instance has come from the UK and Scottish governments with policy designed to encourage organisations to engage with apprenticeships. In this instance, the organisation appears to be relenting to the pressure, engaging with the policy and thus may be rewarded financially for doing so, yet is not offering the additional opportunity that the government had intended.

One response that is mentioned by employers within the available survey data, though to a less consistent degree, is the notion that employers are partially pushed to engage with apprenticeships because it is believed that doing so is the norm or expectation within the industry. This is seen within the Apprenticeships Evaluation 2021 (IFF, 2022), with 15% of employers noting that apprenticeships are the industry norm and this factors into decision-making. This response suggests a form of isomorphism, specifically, mimetic isomorphism. Di Maggio and Powell (1983) discussed the role of isomorphism and placed the constant need for organisations to attain legitimacy as being at the root of this occurrence. Organisational legitimacy refers to the perception of an organisation as being acknowledged and accepted within a wider social system, and organisations proactively seek legitimacy to demonstrate their right to exist within the wider social and economic system through their processes, demonstration of their values and outputs (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Mimetic isomorphism therefore occurs when organisations seek to legitimise themselves by mimicking the processes, value systems and mannerisms of other organisations perceived as legitimate. This is referred to by Haveman (1993) as 'conformity through imitation'. In terms of apprenticeships in Scotland, it is evidently the case that apprenticeships have a strong, historic role within certain sectors to the extent that engagement with them is ongoing on a rolling basis at least partly because this is how things have always been done (Canning & Laing, 2004).

This is particularly true of skilled, often male-dominated, manual labour roles in factories, shipyards and building sites. Scotland for example has a long and proud history of apprenticeship training in the construction industry and the engineering

sector (Knox & McKinlay, 1999). These sectors within Scotland are still reliant upon apprenticeship recruitment in the modern day (Skills Development Scotland, 2023). A long list of job roles exists for which apprenticeships are almost exclusively the route into such careers. For school leavers in Scotland seeking a trade as a plumber, an electrician, a bricklayer, a welder, a carpenter or many other similar roles, an apprenticeship remains the most viable option to pursue such a career. Research suggests (BIBB, 2015) that in other countries, and for many of these same job roles, employers recruit apprenticeships simply because it is the most commonplace and expected thing to do.

The evidence that isomorphism drives engagement appears to be less conclusive than the evidence supporting the prominence of the other four key motivations outlined, however the very nature of isomorphism again highlights the problem with the research methods used in these surveys. Mimetic isomorphism is often a process that occurs unconsciously, meaning that employer behaviour may have been driven by a desire to mimic the behaviour of others without this motive being understood or acknowledged. This naturally means that mimetic isomorphism is likely to be underreported as a driving force within any survey. Therefore, this is a factor which should be considered as potentially significant, and it is evident that more in-depth research is required to truly evaluate the employer decision making process.

The retention of staff is also found as a motivating factor within survey data, though not across every report. Within the SDS publication (2020), the utilisation of apprenticeships to help retain staff is cited as one of the most important influencing factors for engaged employers in Scotland, with 79% claiming that this had an impact in organisational decision making. It is also cited within the Apprenticeships Evaluation (IFF, 2022) in England, though to a lesser degree, with 5% of employers suggesting that this influenced the decision to engage. Retention has been noted as a particular concern in health (Christie, 2022), social care (Scottish Government, 2020) and construction (Scottish Construction Now, 2022). It has also been shown that employers that pay the real living wage across the UK report a 75% improvement in motivation and retention of staff (Heery, Nash &

Hann, 2021) and fair work advocates argue that pursuing a fair work model is the most effective way to deliver an employment package that will help convince staff to remain with any given organisation over the long-term (Scottish Government, 2023b). It will be important to note how staff retention impacts employer decision making in relation to apprenticeship engagement, and to critically evaluate how this relates to broader strategy, particularly around fair work practices.

Whilst all four state-sponsored surveys on apprenticeships considered employer motivations for engagement, only two of these included the views of non-engaged employers, seeking to determine key motivations for deciding against hiring and training apprentices. The Scottish Employer Perspective Survey (IFF, 2021) and the English Employer Perspective Survey (IFF, 2020) both attempted to ascertain the views of non-engaged employers in the exact same way in Scotland and England respectively. Each used a quantitative survey, with participants being asked to give their key reasons for not engaging, without using a pre-determined list of factors, and without being limited in the number of reasons provided. 735 participants were asked in Scotland, and 11,784 were asked in England. The results were similar but with slight differences. In each instance, three broad categories of motivation were identified as significantly influencing employer behaviour: structural reasons, strategic choice, and lack of awareness. In addition, within the survey conducted in Scotland, the COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned by 8% of employer as having impacted the decision not to engage, whereas this was not mentioned within the English context because that research was conducted before the pandemic took hold.

In Scotland, 65% of employers suggested that structural factors acted to discourage or prevent them from engaging with apprenticeships (IFF, 2021), whereas in England (IFF, 2020), this figure was slightly lower at 62%. A further breakdown is available however, showing in greater depth how this choice was framed by participants. The most significant structural reason for example was that the employer was not looking to recruit new staff, with 18% of non-engaged employers, in both Scotland and England, claiming that this was the reason for non-engagement. This answer is straightforward and self-explanatory, however it



again highlights the limitations of the research method. It would have been useful for example, to ask how long these organisations have been fully staffed, if they have ever engaged with apprenticeships prior to reaching staffing capacity and if they would consider engagement should staff leave or staffing needs change. This could have helped confirm whether staffing was the sole issue preventing engagement, or if other structures or factors beneath the surface also helped drive the choice not to engage.

There were other straightforward practical structural barriers noted that discouraged engagement. 6% of Scottish employers and 8% of English employers claimed that they could not afford to hire and train apprentices. Recruitment and training come with cost and risk, and financial commitment naturally influences the employer decision making process when considering apprenticeship engagement, however research has shown that organisations can use apprenticeships to lower recruitment costs in the long run (Lerman, 2019). Gambin and Hogarth (2016) have provided an insightful analysis of apprenticeship costs and benefits, though this work was specific to England and pre-dated the levy. They concluded that the higher the percentage of overall cost an organisation is expected to pay for an apprenticeship programme, the less likely the organisation is to engage. They also note that to recoup those costs, a broad and effective HR strategy is required. Since this research was published, the Apprenticeship Levy has changed the apprenticeship landscape, but financial implications will be central to any employer decision making process, and there is clearly room to develop understanding of the role cost plays in relation to apprenticeship engagement in post-Levy Scotland.

Another significant practical challenge for employers is in having the time, space and resource to manage training and on-the-job learning. 3% of non-engaged employers in Scotland claim that they do not have the time to train apprentices (IFF, 2021), compared to 5% in England (IFF, 2020). 2% of these employers in both Scotland (IFF, 2021) and England (IFF, 2020) suggest that they do not have the resources, which might be physical space or supervisor time, to support apprentice learning. There is evidence within international literature that this is a significant

factor in other countries such as Malaysia (Kaprawi et al, 2021), and it is natural that such pivotal practical matters will restrict organisations if the resources are not available.

It is also claimed that a problem some organisations have is in finding a suitable apprenticeship candidate. This is reported by 2% of non-engaged Scottish employers (IFF, 2021). Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley (2015) note that a specific issue seems to exist around the ability of employers to attract the correct calibre of candidate to fill apprenticeship positions at graduate level, with 51% of employers reporting this problem. This may be indicative of a labour market lacking the skills required to meet demand, but it may also be taken as evidence to support the claims made by Fabian and Taylor-Smith (2021) that the level of skill and experience expected of graduate level apprentices is too high. Mieschbuehler, Neary and Hooley's (2015) research is conducted within the English context, however Fabian and Taylor-Smith (2021) have reported these findings across both Scotland and England. Their work focused more on positioning of apprenticeships than engagement or employer motivation, but this finding is worthy of further consideration. If expectations are too high, it is reasonable to suggest that employers will be dissatisfied more frequently, which may impact on future decisions around engagement.

The second significant category of factors, drawn from the two primary surveys, that influence the employer decision to not engage with apprenticeships relates to strategic choice. 28% of Scottish non-engaged employers (SDS, 2020), and 32% of English non-engaged employers (IFF 2021) actively choose not to hire and train apprentices. This figure is broken down into more specific reasons, and in both instances, the key sub-reason given is that the organisation has fully skilled staff, meaning they have no need to recruit apprentices. This accounts for 16% of Scottish participants and 13% of English participants. Additionally, 3% of Scottish employers and 3% of English employers simply note that they have no need to engage without expanding on why that is. This means that organisations deciding that they do not need apprentices is by far the most cited individual reason for not engaging across Scotland and England within data available.

That some employers have adequate skills, qualifications, and experience within their organisations, meaning that apprenticeships are simply not required, will undoubtedly be the case. It is possible though that an organisation could have all the skills it needs because it has embarked upon a strategy of not needing many, or any, highly skilled workers at all, deliberately opting to break down work tasks to remove skilled elements where possible. This is referred to as deskilling, as was discussed within the *Introduction Chapter*. The concept of deskilling can be traced back to the work of Braverman, who drew on Marxist concepts in his writing on what he termed the 'degradation of work' (1974). Braverman accepts the fundamental basis of Marx's analysis of the labour process which is that there is an irreconcilable tension and conflict that exists between workers and employers, as within the capitalist system, the worker's capacity to work is primed towards the accumulation of capital for the benefit of the employer. Braverman and Marx both therefore contend that this conflict of interest means that a form of coercive control is required for capital to ensure that the worker operates to their benefit (Reid, 2003).

Where Braverman (1974) builds upon what Marx has discussed before him is in his conclusion that a central aspect of the labour process is the requirement for capital to attempt to reduce cost and raise surplus value by overseeing the fragmentation and deskilling of the workforce. If employers are given the opportunity to reorganise work at a lower skill level, then they will do so. This deskilling has a range of consequences, most notably in the reduction of labour costs. This occurs because less is expected of employees and there is a greater pool of people able to complete such tasks. Deskilling also increases management control, as the employees have less autonomy and power, whilst a looser labour market ensures that the jobs are less secure (Devinatz, 2014). Capitalists will always continue to develop technology and mechanisation to further increase the simplification of tasks and deskilling of work (Reid, 2003). A qualitative approach, underpinned by a critical realist analysis, is necessary to provide a more thorough evaluation of the role of deskilling in impacting apprenticeship engagement than is available in current literature because employers are unlikely to simply acknowledge that they do not engage with apprenticeships because of deskilling,

rather this may have to be drawn out from discussions or inferred from available data.

Linked to discussions around deskilling and the broader pattern of the degradation of work is the increase in job flexibility and insecurity. We see this in the rise of the 'gig economy', with an increasing number of working arrangements in Scotland being characterised by a mixture of temporary contracts, flexible hours, agency work, self-employment status, low pay, minimised worker power, limited career development opportunities and a lack of statutory rights and benefits (Myhill, Richards & Sang, 2021). In contemporary Scotland, the predictions of Beck (1999) resonate, having once warned of an insecure future for workers in developed nations, arguing that rather than seeing pay and conditions improving, working conditions would drop to reach the levels of developing countries like Brazil, and work would be characterised by the increasing insecurity and informality we now see manifest. As apprenticeships are clearly defined working arrangements, with training periods often lasting several years, and given that they are often viewed as a future investment in the workforce, it stands to reason that employers that prioritise flexibility and take a more short term view, arguably by exploiting workers and enforcing substandard working conditions, are perhaps less likely to be keen to engage with apprenticeships.

Another specific reason given by employers to explain why they have actively decided against recruiting apprentices is that they instead prefer to hire experienced staff. This was a response provided by 5% of participants in Scotland and 6% in England. This infers a possible concern over hiring inexperienced and younger staff. Apprenticeships in Scotland are no longer limited to young people however they are still primarily taken up by those aged 24 or under (Skills Development Scotland, 2023). It is important then to consider how the perception of young people may impact the decision-making process for organisations seeking to engage with apprenticeships. There exists literature which contends that young workers are often viewed with scepticism by management, who are in some cases hesitant to hire young staff as they fear that the new generation entering the workforce have different values to those who came before them (DeLong & Storey,

2004), that they can often be uncommitted (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), they lack basic workplace skills (British Chamber of Commerce, 2014), and are fundamentally unprepared for the world of work (Confederation of British Industry, 2019). A further study has shown that some employers are hesitant to recruit young workers as they deem them to represent a risk to the business (Davies et al, 2012). It is potentially the case that if employers hold a negative view of young people, they may be less inclined to take on an apprentice.

The third and final broad category of reasons that employers have given within the two publications to explain their non-engagement with apprenticeships relates to a lack of awareness of apprenticeships and available frameworks. In Scotland, 11% of non-engaged employers claim that a lack of awareness explains the decision (IFF, 2021) whilst that figure is slightly lower at 9% in England (IFF, 2020). There are several specific claims within this category, including that the organisation has never considered it (4% Scotland, 6% England), that they do not know enough about them (3% Scotland, 1% England) and that they are not aware of them at all (3% Scotland, 2% England). Again, there is evidence within international literature that this is a problem elsewhere too. Jansen and Pineda-Herrero (2019) conducted research that considered the perspectives of 800 employers based in Catalonia that shows that a key factor that often dissuades or prevents apprenticeship engagement is a simple lack of understanding of apprenticeships and how they work. The problem seems less accentuated in Scotland, but it remains a problem nonetheless.

When taking a closer look at data within the Scottish Employer Perspective Survey (IFF, 2021), the problem may also be slightly greater than the report suggests. The document argues that 65% of employers do not engage partly because of structural factors, and 11% do not engage in part because of lack of awareness. However, some of the specific reasons that have been included within the structural category could potentially be problems of awareness rather than structural barriers. Within that 65% figure, 13% of employers claimed that ‘apprenticeships are not offered in our industry’, 10% said ‘they are not suitable due to the size of the establishment’ and 9% claimed ‘they are not relevant to our business’. It is

likely the case that in some instances, those claims accurately reflect the position of the organisation. However, it is also likely, on the balance of probabilities, that some of these employers lack awareness of the broad range of apprenticeship frameworks now available to be engaged with which has created the false belief that a structural barrier is preventing engagement. This again highlights the need for an in-depth, qualitative evaluation of Scottish employer decision making relating to apprenticeships.

Having considered and critically evaluated the available state-sponsored research on apprenticeship engagement in Scotland and across the UK, it is important to consider the other available research on the topic. A similar survey was carried out by the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland (2018), which provides some insight into the rationale of small businesses in Scotland that have engaged with apprenticeships in recent years. This is the only significant non-governmental study of apprenticeship engagement conducted in contemporary Scotland, which is why it is worthy of consideration. However, the FSB report follows the same pattern as the four state-sponsored surveys with the exact same limitations with a quantitative survey approach that prioritises surface level findings over deeper critical analysis. This unsurprisingly produces similar findings, noting that HCT, CSR and mimetic isomorphism, each provide a significant theoretical underpinning to the logic of many employers that engage with apprenticeships.

The FSB survey also uses a pre-determined list that respondents could choose from to explain the decision taken to engage with apprenticeships, which restricts the respondents in terms of what they can say. Whilst this is a flaw in the research design, a consequence of it is that the responses picked least tell an interesting tale. The evidence of this survey suggests that employers generally do not recruit apprentices on the basis that they believe that they are likely to be highly motivated, capable, and committed employees for the business. Given that apprentices are generally young workers, this data is indirectly supported by research previously alluded to that outlines employer concerns over hiring the new generation entering the workforce. Whilst it is the case that the FSB report has considerable limitations, and therefore it cannot be assumed that the findings tell

the complete story of employer motivation and apprenticeships in Scotland, the key takeaways are likely still indicative of important factors in the employer decision-making process.

Further work was carried out by Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley (2015), who conducted a survey of 190 employers based across all 9 English regions, attempting to better understand employer motivations for engaging with 'Higher Apprenticeships', which are akin to GAs in Scotland. Again, broadly similar responses were produced, however one popular response is identified as part of this work that is largely absent from other similar publications. The second most popular response given by participants suggests that many English employers are being enticed into engaging with graduate level apprenticeships by the opportunity to train people the way the organisation wants. This has perhaps come under the umbrella of 'developing talent' within the other surveys, thus it may just be unaccounted for within these data sets, however control over the development of young staff is a distinct motivation that must be considered on its own merit. This strategy has previously been referred to as the white cloth analogy, as a white cloth can be dyed any colour, just as young people's work habits and values can be shaped by the employer (Nagano, 2014). There is existing evidence of Scottish employers referring to apprentices as a 'blank-canvas' on to which they can instil ways of working and organisational values (Quigley, 2019), thus it will be necessary to examine this potential factor in greater depth.

Another relevant issue located within the literature that may also act to discourage apprenticeship engagement is the fear of poaching (Kaprawi et al, 2021). This refers to the concern that an organisation may spend time, money, and effort, to recruit and train an apprentice, only for the apprentice to leave for a competitor upon completion of their training. Mohrenweiser, Zwick and Backes-Gellner (2019) argue that poaching occurs typically when the victim organisation is in a temporary downturn and when the poaching organisation is seeking to expand, thus the phenomenon is a transitory event rather than a systemic threat to organisations engaging in apprenticeships. Given that the perception exists that poaching presents a threat and given that there is no analysis available of this

within a Scottish context, this is another factor that must be considered further.

As was previously noted, Gambin and Hogarth (2016) undertook an in-depth analysis of the costs and benefits of apprenticeships to employers in England. This relied on data gathered from another research project, which involved a series of case studies and face-to-face interviews with employers, allowing for more nuance and depth than some comparable publications. Data was gathered between 1994 and 2012 however, meaning that it is slightly dated and cannot account for the impact of the Apprenticeship Levy. Within the paper, Gambin and Hogarth identify several key motivating factors for employers. The analysis was split into two categories, supply side and demand side, noting that on the supply side, employers were often motivated to engage having been contacted by training providers and told of incentives, whilst employers focused upon the demand side were often motivated by a desire to invest in the human capital of the organisation and the development of skills. This then broadly correlates with the findings found within the four state-sponsored surveys on apprenticeship engagement in Scotland and across the UK in relation to significant motivating factors.

Further relevant research was produced by Hughes and Monteiro relating solely to apprenticeship engagement in England. Although it is slightly dated, having been published in 2005, it presents an interesting argument that the level of employer apprenticeship engagement will generally be determined by the size of organisation, and the employer's relationship with a training provider. This research only consisted of 33 telephone interviews, which is a relatively small sample. Available evidence however supports these broad findings and demonstrates that larger employers are more likely to engage with apprenticeships in Scotland. 19% of all organisations in Scotland that employ two or more people engage with apprenticeships, however for organisations with between 25-49 employees this figure is 36%, for those with between 50-99 employees that rises to 49%, and 53% of organisations in Scotland with more than 100 employees engage with apprenticeships (IFF, 2021). There is however a need to better understand what determines level of engagement to understand, in greater depth, the relationship between the size of an organisation, the relationship with learning



providers, and how this impacts apprenticeship engagement levels.

There is also interesting research on apprenticeship engagement and employer motivation that has been conducted largely outside of the UK. Chankseliani and Anuar (2019) published a conceptual paper that analyses employer motivations for apprenticeship engagement across 10 countries: Australia, Brazil, Denmark, Egypt, England, Finland, Germany, India, Malaysia, and South Africa. Again, most of these countries have vastly different environments for apprenticeships from Scotland, but developing some understanding of this literature is still valuable as it allows for factors and themes to be identified that impact apprenticeship engagement internationally that may also have some bearing on employers in Scotland. A key conceptual foundation to Chankseliani and Anuar's (2019) analysis is the contention that employers can be broadly categorised as understanding skills as either a specific, private, organisational good, or if it is considered that the organisation is part of a wider national, industry or sectoral community in which skills are understood as both a public and private good. They proclaim that many employers are primarily motivated to engage with apprenticeships due to a HR logic and commitment to developing human capital. They also note that in Germany, 41% of employers proclaim that they engage with apprenticeships (BIBB, 2015) in part because it is something that they have always done, again suggesting mimetic isomorphism (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983).

The paper also highlights some factors that prevent or dissuade apprenticeship engagement across these ten countries. Broadly speaking, non-engaged employers across these countries often find apprenticeships to be too costly, too complicated or represent too high a risk to justify the commitment required, whilst poaching is again raised as a concern (Chankseliani & Anuar, 2019). There are also issues facing employers within each individual country that appear to be specific to that context. In South Africa, a levy introduced served to disincentivise some employers as they were not satisfied with its operation and viewed it as an additional tax burden, something that resonates with employers in the UK broadly (CIPD, 2018). There are also findings that likely would not impact Scottish employers in the same way. For example, in India the labour market is not particularly inducive to high

levels of apprenticeship engagement as there are high levels of informal skills and training, passed through family run businesses, limiting the requirement or desire for formal skills and training. This highlights why making direct comparisons between employer behaviour in these countries and employer behaviour in Scotland would be misguided, however there is value in considering some of the more relevant key findings with the caveat that these factors and issues may have a different impact in Scotland.

Outside of the scope of research that focuses directly on apprenticeship engagement and employer motivations, Simms (2017) undertook research that focused on how employers engaged in the employment of young people, with some reference to apprenticeship uptake and with evident crossover with apprenticeship engagement literature. Utilising the Van Gestel and Nyberg (2009) framework, Simms notes that employers are typically motivated broadly by both the business/HR case for engagement, such as incentives around training, and by a sense of CSR to provide training opportunities to young staff. This echoes the findings of the four state sponsored surveys on employer motivations for apprenticeship engagement. Simms (2017) also proposes that individual HR staff have a prominent role in the process described, and that staff members often report encountering resistance within the organisation to engagement. This is a good example of the type of nuance that has likely been missed in the four state commissioned quantitative surveys on employer behaviour and motivations.

A final dimension to consider when evaluating available literature around apprenticeship engagement is the relationship between the conceptualisation of the apprenticeship and the delivery and experience of apprenticeships, as these factors have the potential to feed directly into employer attitude and motivation to engage. This thesis has defined apprenticeships within the context of this work in contractual terms, which has been deemed appropriate because of the focus of policy and government objectives around increasing new apprenticeship starts. However, as was noted within discussion on definitions in the Introduction Chapter, apprenticeships can be understood more broadly as a model of vocational

education and training, and it is important to acknowledge and discuss the impact of this framing.

Lave and Wenger (1991) were particularly influential in this field, arguing that the educational journey of apprentices occurs over time. They suggest that through the apprenticeship, novices can learn informally through 'situated learning', often by observation and peripheral participation, within the social and cultural sphere of the workplace, referred to as a community of practice, to eventually master their trade or role within that environment and become experts. Aspects of this framing have been critiqued as reductive, over-simplifying the learning process and failing to account for the fact that many apprentices learn and contribute meaningfully within organisations quickly, and that the teaching process can be reciprocal from mentor to apprentice, and from apprentice to mentor (Fuller et al, 2005). Whilst this is a valid critique that speaks to the layered apprenticeship experience, evidence demonstrates that the vision of this learning journey retains influence within the apprenticeship literature (Guile & Young, 2011; Parker, 2013; Hegna, 2018) and continues to impact how and why some employers engage with apprenticeships.

Building on these ideas, Fuller and Unwin (2016) view apprenticeships as 'the vehicle for the initial development of occupational expertise' (P.11), suggesting that they should be understood as a 'distinctive model of skill formation for the benefit of individuals, employers and society more generally' (P.11). They also suggest that this meaning has been eroded over time within the UK, at least in part because of UK Government policy, arguing that apprenticeships have been misunderstood as an additional form of workplace training. Fuller and Unwin (2003) contributed significantly to this literature with a framework which measures the extent to which organisations are providing the learning conditions essential to meeting the pair's definition of apprenticeship, known as the 'expansive-restrictive continuum'. Through this framework they propose that workplace learning environments can be placed along a spectrum, expansive at one end, restrictive at the other, and that there exists a series of key indicators and

characteristics that help determine where any given workplace learning environment sits on the scale. This is shown in full below:



Figure 1 (Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

This spectrum differentiates between apprenticeships that are expansive, and closer to what Fuller and Unwin believe to represent the optimal conditions for an apprentice to learn to become experts in the field, and restrictive apprenticeships, which signify the degradation of apprenticeships as a model of learning. As this is a spectrum, how apprenticeships are designed and implemented will not lead to clear distinctions, but rather for placement along the continuum. The work of Lave and Wenger (1993) and Fuller and Unwin (2003; 2016) continues to hold significant influence in literature relating to the conceptualisation of apprenticeships and how

they are delivered in practice, but what is more is that there is clear evidence that these ideas interact with employer engagement.

Brockmann and Smith (2023) recently published research that highlights how conceptualisation of what an apprenticeship is can impact why and how employers engage with apprenticeships. Brockmann and Smith were each involved in separate studies which conducted research in the Autumn of 2018 (Brockmann & Laurie, 2020; Cui & Smith, 2020), almost 18 months after the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy. The 2023 publication utilises data from the earlier projects to evaluate the ‘new model’ of apprenticeship in England, which ostensibly involves a more demand-driven and employer-led approach and the use of the levy to attempt to incentivise employers. The English apprenticeship system is more market driven than what is found within Scotland (CIPD, 2023), and this must be factored in when considering English apprenticeship research, but there are still pertinent findings in this instance that are likely to be somewhat reflected in Scotland.

Data is drawn from two case studies, which are primarily reliant on interviews with private training providers and documentary analysis, and supplementary interviews with other relevant stakeholders. The approach taken is comprehensive and allows for a detailed, nuanced, critical evaluation of the perspectives of stakeholders not found in the quantitative studies discussed, and it also resembles the data collection methods of this work (as briefly outlined in the *Introduction Chapter* and to be further discussed within the *Research Design Chapter*). Given the strengths of the methodology and the similarity of approach, it is likely the case that conclusions drawn by Brockmann and Smith (2023) will offer insight into some key themes that may be found within this thesis, though with the caveat around contextual differences in England and Scotland.

What is found is that there are three distinct ‘modes of apprenticeship’ identified in England, meaning three distinctly different conceptualisations of apprenticeships that then shape the way that these are designed, delivered and experienced. The three modes identified are as follows: (a) apprenticeships as a

means to developing apprentices into experts within industry-wide communities of practice, (b) apprenticeships as staff development, and (c) apprenticeships as an income stream or avenue for some form of financial gain. The first conceptualisation echoes some of the key principles of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Fuller and Unwin (2003), and it is notable that these employers engage with apprenticeships with a long-term view, seeking to retain apprentices once qualified. What is also found here is also that these employers tend to have developed strong partnerships with multiple stakeholders. Whilst previously discussed quantitative studies (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022) have helped to identify notions of development as being a significant motivating factor for some engaged employers, Brockmann and Smith are able to go further in specifically identifying how some employers explicitly understand apprenticeships as a gradual process of learning that can be utilised to develop talent for the long term, for the organisation and industry.

The second conceptualisation frames apprenticeships as a form of staff development, and it is noted that within one case study, these apprentices were largely conversions, meaning that they were previously employed by the organisation and had moved role to participate in an apprenticeship. These apprenticeships are still designed to enable employers to develop and retain talent, again echoing available research (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018; Gambin & Hogarth, 2017; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; Chankseliani and Anuar, 2019) however the key distinction is in the conceptualisation and experience. These apprentices are viewed as workers first and learners second, meaning that their ability to contribute to the organisation is treated as being more important than any learning journey. These apprentices are allotted time to learn, however it is noted by management staff interviewed that if there is a rise in business demand and that happens to occur when an apprentice is undertaking off the job learning, they are liable to be called from their role as learner and cast once more as an ordinary worker. Within the framing of the expansive-restrictive continuum (Fuller & Unwin, 2003), these apprenticeships may appear somewhere near the middle of the spectrum. Again, it is the depth of the analysis here that

ensures that Brockmann and Smith's (2023) work stands out in comparison to other research in the field.

The third conceptualisation considers apprenticeships as a vehicle for financial gain. For training providers with this perspective, this means that apprenticeships (and specifically providing off the job training to apprentices for employers) are viewed narrowly as a source of income, and there is a suggestion that this perspective is shared by some resistant employers who are taught how to draw down on the levy to benefit their organisation rather than any apprentices they may employ (Brockmann & Smith, 2023). Under this conceptualisation, training providers are salesman and the relationship between employer and provider is described as often being transactional. This can lead to what the authors refer to as 'performative apprenticeships', whereby employer and training provider are jointly incentivised to minimise training and maximise working output at the expense of the apprentice's development.

In terms of employers viewing apprenticeships as a source of income, this correlates with findings of other academics (Fuller & Unwin, 2009; Richmond, 2018; 2020) about the prevalence of rebadging of apprenticeships to claim funding in England. Once more, the marketised English system and how the levy operates south of the border likely means that this is a more significant issue there than in Scotland, but there is sufficient evidence presented to suggest that these motivations and dynamics should be considered and explored further. Ultimately, Brockmann and Smith (2023) conclude that employers are driven to engage with apprenticeships to address specific business needs, and this then manifests in different conceptualisations, implementations and outputs.

There is available literature that considers employer engagement with education and vocational skill development that must also be acknowledged. This literature tends to frame employer engagement in a broad sense, evaluating a range of employer interventions from input into the shaping of educational curriculum to opportunities offered to young people by employers, including work placements and mock interview experience. Huddleston (2020) helpfully outlines the history of

employer engagement with education and skill development in the UK, noting that employers have been encouraged to engage with the education and training of young people since the 1960s, though this has not always occurred in an effective way. There is also evidence to suggest that employers are not as keen to shape the vocational education element of apprenticeships as much as policymakers assume (Relly & Laczik, 2022).

Stanley and Mann (2014) created an employer engagement framework that conceptualises employer engagement in education through a 'life-course' analysis, seeking to understand how employer involvement with young people helps to shape their life choices and career development opportunities as they transition from education and through different jobs. From a vocational education and skill development perspective, there is obvious value in evaluating what role employers should play in designing learning environments and materials, and to understanding the impact that encounters with employers has on future opportunities for young people. However, for the purposes of this research, the educational perspective offers too narrow a focus, and would not account for the role of apprentices as employees, as well as learners. Evidence throughout this chapter has demonstrated that employers are motivated to engage with apprenticeships for varying reasons (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018; Gambin & Hogarth, 2017; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; Chankseliani and Anuar, 2019), and that the role of the apprentice as an employee is central to how employers conceptualise apprenticeships and to decisions taken on whether to engage.

The literature analysed throughout this section demonstrates that there are themes that can be drawn from the literature on motivating and dissuading factors on apprenticeship engagement. It is evidently the case that employers within different contexts often proclaim that they are primarily motivated by an investment strategy related to HCT, by a sense of altruism tied to CSR, or by a desire to claim funding or fill short term employment gaps within the organisation. Practical obstacles are often cited by non-engaged employers as the primary reason for the decision taken not to engage, though others suggest that non-engagement is a strategic choice. It is also the case that there are weaknesses to



the research approaches found within the literature, most notably oversimplification and a lack of depth and nuance. Greater understanding is therefore required to reveal the causal mechanisms and structures that motivate and drive employer behaviour in Scotland.

### Employer Attitudes

Whilst much of the available relevant literature focuses on employer motivations, some research considers employer attitudes as being meaningful for understanding employer engagement. Attitudes are determined by historic memory and ongoing assessment, meaning that attitudes are typically stable, but there exists potential for attitudes to change (Albarracin & Shavitt, 2018). The literature available on employer attitudes to apprenticeships only considers the attitudes of employers that engage with apprenticeships, with no notable study evaluating the attitudes of non-engaged employers found. There is some interesting historical work evaluating attitudes of employers across the UK to apprenticeships not long after the introduction of the new modern apprenticeship programme, which also applied to Scotland. Maguire (1998) conducted 500 interviews with employers, concluding that in the early period of modern apprenticeships employers were generally positive about apprenticeships, with 90% of participants proclaiming that they would advise other firms in their sector to engage with apprenticeships. This is important as it demonstrates that from the outset, engaged employers have mostly, but not always, held positive attitudes about apprenticeships. This trend continues within contemporary research.

The two most significant pieces of research in this area specifically seek to evaluate 'satisfaction' rather than attitudes, attempting to ascertain how satisfied employers feel about apprenticeships. Satisfaction and attitude are not identical concepts but there is significant overlap in this context in that both are about how employers feel about apprenticeships, so analysing available research on satisfaction acts as a likely indicator of employer attitudes to apprenticeships. These publications are two of the four previously discussed state commissioned

reports; namely the Apprenticeship Employer Survey (SDS, 2020) and the Apprenticeships Evaluation 2021 (IFF, 2022). The former was conducted in Scotland, the latter in England. It remains worthwhile to consider the findings in England given the similarities previously outlined but with an understanding that there are differences across these two apprenticeship contexts which must be kept in mind. These reports used quantitative surveys to measure employer attitudes in relation to apprenticeships.

In Scotland, 88% of employers reported that they were satisfied with MAs overall (SDS, 2020). These employers were asked to rate the specific elements of MAs in terms of satisfaction, with the quality of training (85%), support from the provider (84%) and the relevance of training (84%) scoring highest, though the quality of applicant garnered the least level of satisfaction at 68%. A breakdown is available too via framework, with Management (96%), Dental Nursing (95%) and Retail (93%) scoring highest, and Digital Applications (74%), Automotive (82%) and Hairdressing and Barbering (84%) scoring lowest. The report also provides a breakdown of what specific issues are cited as most satisfactory or dissatisfactory by framework, showing the strengths and weaknesses across the Scottish apprenticeship system. This is highly detailed and valuable in demonstrating current attitudes towards apprenticeships of engage employers in Scotland, though there is a need to build on this to understand what relationship exists between attitude and engagement, and to develop understanding of the attitudes of non-engaged employers.

In England, overall satisfaction is slightly lower than in Scotland, sitting at 83% (IFF, 2022). There are certain employer characteristics identified by the research that make an employer more likely to be dissatisfied with apprenticeships. Smaller organisations (those who employ under ten people), those who had dismissed apprentices and those who were primarily motivated by financial reasons, were less likely to be satisfied than other employers. It is also interesting to note that whilst satisfaction with apprenticeships is high across both Scotland and England according to available data, it is shown that being satisfied with apprenticeships is not essential for continued engagement. Some employers are evidently dissatisfied, and potentially hold a negative attitude regarding apprenticeships,

yet continue to engage.

Mitschelen (2023) produced research on apprenticeship engagement in the United States of America, specifically seeking to ‘determine the attitudes and values relating to the decision-making process for employer engagement in apprenticeship programs’ (p.35). Whilst the apprenticeship context in the US is markedly different from the one in Scotland, it is noted that the ageing workforce is a growing concern that is acting to force more employers to consider apprenticeship engagement, a factor that evidence suggests is also important for apprenticeship engagement in Scotland (Quigley, 2019). Building from the focus on attitudes and values, the most significant and interesting finding in this work is the contention that employer expectation is a greater behavioural driver than employer experience. What the employer expects to gain from the engagement, rather than attitude shaped by experience, is what has a more significant impact upon decision making. Overall, the available literature that evaluates employer attitudes towards apprenticeships is limited compared to what research is available regarding employer motivation, but a clear framework is needed to develop understanding of how motivation, attitudes and engagement interlink.

### Apprenticeship Policies and Initiatives

In addition to examining available literature around employer behaviour, motivations and attitudes to apprenticeship engagement, it is important to consider the legislative and bureaucratic context for apprenticeships in Scotland. New legislation and initiatives have shifted the apprenticeship context in Scotland, and these changes must be evaluated if employer behaviour is to be understood. The most significant policy to consider is the Apprenticeship Levy. The UK Government introduced the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 to increase the recruitment of apprentices and to incentivise employers to upskill the workforce. The Apprenticeship Levy targets large employers, with any employer with an annual salary bill of over £3million being required to pay a levy of 0.5% of their salary bill to the government. This money is then used to fund apprenticeship

training and qualifications testing. Smaller employers who do not pay as much as £3m per year in salary costs are not required to pay the levy but they can access funding support for apprentices (Department for Education, 2018) though how this operates in practice differs across the nations within the United Kingdom.

The Levy applies in Scotland having been introduced by the UK Government in Westminster. It is managed by SDS, and the Scottish system operates in a markedly different way to the rest of the UK. In England for example, the levy is worked using a straightforward 'voucher' system, whereby employers can claim back on the amount they have paid through their Digital Apprenticeship Service (DAS) account, using virtual vouchers assigned to their DAS account to fund apprenticeship training (Access Training, 2017). In Wales, apprenticeship training is fully government funded, whilst employers can also claim up to £4,000 for each new apprenticeship hire (Training Services Wales, 2021). The Scottish Government receives Scotland's share of the Apprenticeship Levy, calculated using the Barnett Formula each year from the UK Government, and is then able to determine how best to use that money to support apprenticeships (Davidson, 2017).

Gallacher and Reeve (2019) present a convincing case that the Scottish apprenticeship system is a much more 'managed' skills system than the system in England (Keep, 2017), which is more market driven with higher levels of privatisation across education and training and with an emphasis on competition between providers. Rather than dispensing vouchers to individual employers, the Scottish Government has invested in the creation and implementation of apprenticeship frameworks across a broad range of industries and sectors (Scottish Government, 2017). The state contributes to the training cost for MAs and fully covers the cost for GAs through the levy. The levy has also supported the Flexible Workforce Development Fund, which allows employers to apply for up to £15,000 in support for training and upskilling, though this does not necessarily have to be used for apprenticeship training.

There is very little academic research that specifically considers the Apprenticeship Levy within the Scottish context, thus it is necessary to consider

research and literature that evaluates the impact of the Levy across the UK, most often in England. Two publications evaluated the predicted impact of the levy in England, and whilst the findings may not directly transfer to the Scottish context, they are indicative of the confusion and negativity surrounding the levy's introduction. Firstly, Gambin, Hogarth et al's (2016) work indicated that when the levy took effect, it would likely lead to many employers continuing to engage with apprenticeships at the level they already did. The interviews conducted as part of their research demonstrates that about a third of employers were likely to be unmoved by the levy. Approximately half of employers suggested that their level of engagement may change with the introduction of the levy. Secondly, a CIPD report published in 2016 offered an even less optimistic prediction, suggesting that more employers would not develop or expand their own apprenticeship programme because of the levy, than those that would. The main conclusion to be drawn from these two pieces of research is that employers were largely unsure of what the impact may be, and the inconsistent data demonstrate this.

Gambin and Hogarth revisited this issue in 2021, re-using data collected from the previous study and analysing these interviews alongside apprenticeship statistics in England from the point of the levy's introduction. This paper concludes that the Apprenticeship Levy has coincided with a decrease in apprenticeship engagement, across the UK, though this is not true of Scotland (SDS, 2022). The paper presents evidence through a series of case studies that the levy has the potential to increase apprenticeship starts at the margin, but that ultimately, the level of growth sought is unlikely to be achievable because the UK labour market and the skills within it are overly susceptible to the whims of global market forces. Criticism of the levy appears to have heightened as time has passed.

A key voice in the cross-UK debate surrounding the Apprenticeship Levy is Richmond, a former government adviser for the Department of Education and the founder and director of the EDSK thinktank, through which he has published reports on apprenticeships and training broadly, as well as on the operation of the levy (Staufenberg, 2021), though his work is largely England-centric. The EDSK alleges that the levy led to an immediate drop in new apprenticeship starts and

has served to erode the term ‘apprenticeship’ by prioritising quantity over quality. Most significantly, it is argued that the levy has created ‘fake apprenticeships’ (Richmond & Regan, 2022). This broadly occurs in two different ways, the first of which occurs through low skilled jobs that do not require the technical training associated with apprenticeships, such as shop check out assistants, bar staff and office administrative positions, being framed as apprenticeships. This concern has been echoed by trade union voices in Scotland who are fearful this undermines apprenticeships as a model of delivering skilled work (Quigley, 2019). This could be considered another example of organisational decoupling relating to apprenticeship engagement, similarly to the substitution strategy discussed early within this chapter.

The second element of the ‘fake apprenticeship’ phenomenon is in the way that employers have sought to circumvent the levy by re-badging existing training and positions, particularly management and leadership training, as apprenticeship training (Richmond, 2020). This allows employers to draw back down on the levy without offering the additional training or opportunity hoped for. In these instances, there is also scope for a substitution strategy to be used. The claim made about rebadging is supported by research that showed that prior to the introduction of the levy, employers openly reported that they intended to circumvent it by rebadging existing jobs and training in the way described (CIPD, 2018). Whilst these pieces of research have centred on the English apprenticeship system, there is some evidence that this may be occurring in Scotland too (Quigley, 2019). This will need to be examined more closely north of the border. The Scottish funding system though does not involve vouchers to reclaim funds and does include more opportunity for funding non-apprentice training. This arguably makes it less likely that rebadging will be as significant a concern in Scotland compared to in England.

As stated, most academic literature regarding the Apprenticeship Levy, and specifically how it relates to employer engagement with apprenticeships, has been either conducted in relation to the UK, or solely to the English context. There are some non-academic criticisms that have been raised regarding how the Scottish

Government has implemented the Apprenticeship Levy, most notably and frequently coming from those representing the interests of business and private capital (Askeland, 2017; Peattie, 2021). The primary concerns relate to practical questions around how the funding is accessed, and policy concerns around how it is allocated. There remains however an evident need for further academic examination of how the levy has impacted the Scottish context to greater understand the employer perspective, and it will be important to understand if the concerns raised by Gambin and Hogarth (2016; 2021), the CIPD (2016; 2018; 2021b) and Richmond (2018; 2020) are relevant to the Scottish context.

Beyond the levy, other initiatives have been introduced that also merit evaluation. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic the Scottish Government sought to protect workers from the economic impact of the nationwide lockdowns, providing specific support to boost apprenticeships. One initiative designed to support apprentices was the 'Adopt an Apprentice Scheme'. This was aimed at supporting those apprentices who were made redundant because of the pandemic. Employers were offered a one-time grant of up to £5,000 to recruit an apprentice who had been let go by another employer during this period. This scheme was initially to end in 2021 however an updated version of the scheme remained available until the end of March of 2022, this time offering £2,000 per apprentice 'adopted', though this figure remained at £5,000 within the oil and gas industry (Skills Development Scotland, 2021). The pot set aside for this scheme was all claimed, therefore it was successful in the sense that employers used it, but there is no available data on how this impacted organisational decision making. It will be important to assess the impact of this, and what aspect of the scheme most appealed to employers.

This was not the only scheme of its kind during the period of the pandemic. The Apprenticeship Employer Grant (AEG) was operated in a similar fashion, though the AEG was on offer for a much shorter period. This grant allowed employers to apply for a one-off payment of up once again to £5,000 for hiring an apprentice between December of 2020 and March of 2021 (Scottish Government, 2020b). The funding for this came from a £25m support package provided by the Scottish Government in response to the pandemic, with £15m of this funding specifically for the AEG.

Unlike the AAA, the AEG was not continued beyond the initial intended period. What was interesting about both the AAA and the AEG was that these initiatives implicitly suggested that in a moment of crisis, the Scottish Government believed the most effective way to boost apprenticeship uptake was with a financial incentive for employers.

The OECD (Kuczera, 2017) however have warned that using broad financial incentives to boost apprenticeship engagement is likely to create ‘substantial deadweight losses’, meaning that money will be spent to subsidise apprentice schemes that employers would have provided anyway. This again highlights the need for the development of a more in-depth understanding of what drives employer behaviour to aid practitioners and policymakers in their quest to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunity available to people in Scotland. It will therefore be important to understand how these schemes were viewed by employers, and particularly to understand if the employers who claimed these funds were driven to engage with apprenticeships by the appeal of a lump sum payment, or if they intended to hire apprentices anyway and were happy to take the money on offer without it being a key factor in decision-making.

A final aspect to consider here is around the practicalities and bureaucracy employers need to navigate to hire and train apprentices. Apprenticeships have previously been associated with complex bureaucratic structures, a perception which in the past has hindered engagement levels within some contexts (Spielhofer & Sims, 2004). More recent research conducted by Baker (2019) has evaluated post-Levy apprenticeships in the NHS across the UK, and a key conclusion drawn from two interviews conducted was that the perception of overbearing bureaucracy within the apprenticeship system is likely to act as a barrier to further extension of the health service’s level of engagement with apprenticeships. Whilst this research is limited, it does demonstrate that where the perception of overbearing bureaucracy in apprenticeships exists, it has the potential to have an adverse impact on engagement. The impact of bureaucracy, and the role of SDS, in managing the Scottish system, therefore requires further analysis.



## Literature Summary

The available literature that relates to apprenticeship engagement is quite limited. The academic literature is sporadic and disconnected, without a clear consensus on what should be examined within the context of apprenticeship engagement, and with no clear framework that helps guide research in the field. The most extensive research has been commissioned by SDS on behalf of the Scottish Government, and the Department for Education on behalf of the UK Government. The research produced is based around large quantitative surveys, which are very useful for highlighting key themes and issues that likely play a significant role in influencing employer decisions around apprenticeship engagement in Scotland.

The most significant issues that encourage apprenticeship engagement are broadly identified as relating to an organisational need to acquire talent and/or develop talent, the intention to use apprenticeships as part of a broader CSR strategy and for financial reasons. Other reasons identified that seem to play a less crucial and consistent role in influencing engagement are mimetic isomorphism, and the use of apprenticeships as a tool for helping to retain staff. The most prominent reasons given by employers to explain non-engagement relate to structural barriers, such as time, space and cost, or strategic decisions, made because of issues like staffing or skill levels and may potentially suggest an organisational commitment to deskilling or flexible contracting. Evidence also exists that demonstrates some employers may have concerns about hiring younger staff members or of seeing apprentice candidates poached by competitors. Finally, there is evidence that a lack of awareness and understanding still limits engagement to some degree.

This knowledge is valuable and helps to shape understanding of some of what is likely to be uncovered within this project. The findings within this literature then help form the basis of the Thematic List that will help direct the analysis of data gathered. The Thematic List will be discussed in greater detail within the *Research Design Chapter*, and the full list is available as *Appendix A*. Despite the utility in helping to generate this list, the literature has its limitations, most notably in the

quantitative approach of the four significant state-commissioned surveys. Whilst these surveys help identify surface level issues, there is a lack of depth and nuance that prevents deeper conclusions being drawn, which is something that this research provides. Given the inconsistency of approach found within academic research, it has been deemed appropriate that a more systemic approach be taken here with the utilisation of a theoretical framework that allows for the consideration of all the key concepts that define apprenticeship engagement.

### Theoretical Framework

The available academic literature on apprenticeship engagement is sporadic and there is no notable academic research on apprenticeship engagement within the contemporary Scottish context, with most relevant work being commissioned by government bodies. There are differing perspectives on what factors matter most when considering employer engagement with apprenticeships, with most research focusing on employer motivations but with no publications able to provide a comprehensive, holistic overview of the factors that drive engagement. Additionally, there is no framework found within the literature that is used to analyse, evaluate, or categorise employer behaviour in relation to apprenticeship engagement that could usefully be applied to a Scottish context. The academic literature around apprenticeship engagement is fragmented and the approaches used are either limited, or inconsistent and disconnected from one another. Much of the current available research (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018; Gambin & Hogarth, 2017; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; Chankseliani and Anuar, 2019). considers only what employers say are the key reasons for engaging, without considering what structural issues may be driving engagement beyond the surface of survey responses. To improve meaningfully on current understandings of apprenticeship engagement by employers in Scotland, a more considered and systematic approach is needed.

Moreover, if a more systematic approach is to be deployed based around a suitable framework, this would need to be drawn from another context or discipline, or

instead created from scratch. It seemed most appropriate to turn to literature on employer engagement with ALMPs, where a range of different conceptual frameworks have been designed to critically evaluate employer behaviour (Snape, 1998; Van Der Aa & Van Berkel, 2014; Martin, 2004; Nelson, 2013; Van Gestel & Nyberg, 2009; Ingold & Valizade, 2015). Much of this work focuses on employer engagement with active labour market policies (ALMPs), which is helpful given that the principles of employer engagement with ALMPs and employer engagement with apprenticeships are similar. Ingold and McGurk (2023) note that academic scholarship has been slow to address employer engagement with ALMPs, particularly in terms of addressing the role of the employer, even though employers are central to the success of any given ALMP. This is also certainly the case with apprenticeship engagement.

ALMPs are government policies designed to impact the labour market by encouraging an increase in recruitment of people into paid work. Robinson (2000) defines ALMPs as having three specific purposes: the reduction of economic inactivity and unemployment, the reduction of public cost in funding unemployment benefits, and finally, the reduction of income poverty. Whilst apprenticeships are not understood as being an ALMP, the purposes laid out by Robinson align with some of the key purposes of apprenticeships at least from a policy perspective, if not in terms of how Fuller and Unwin (2004) would define apprenticeships. Additionally, the requirements for apprenticeships and ALMPs to be successful are the same, in that employers must engage with the process for the stated goals around increased rates of employment to be met. It is for these reasons that time was taken to engage with available frameworks found within the literature relating to employer engagement with ALMPs, to help identify one as being suitable to use to measure, evaluate and critically analyse employer engagement with apprenticeships in Scotland.

There are a host of factors that are contextually important when considering employer engagement with ALMPs, including varieties of capitalism and whether market economies are managed or liberalised (Hall & Soskice, 2001), industrial trade union power and influence, and whether unions can coerce employer

engagement (Korpi, 2006), and the prevalence and role of national-level employers' associations (Martin & Swank, 2004). These are broad environmental factors that may also have a bearing on apprenticeship engagement, however the goal in delving into ALMP engagement literature has been explicitly to identify a useful framework for not just identifying some relevant factors, but to allow for a holistic analysis of all key elements of employer engagement with apprenticeships.

Ingold and Valizade noted in 2015 that at that time, there were two primary categories of typology used to frame employer engagement with ALMPs, those that focused on reasons for engaging, and those that focused more narrowly on level of engagement. This subchapter will therefore outline some key examples of these types of ALMP engagement frameworks, acknowledging their merits whilst clearly explaining why the chosen examples of each framework type have been rejected as possible tools for this research. This discussion will also further highlight why Bredgaard's typology has been deemed the most appropriate and useful for this work compared to other options available.

An important example of a framework used to categorise employers based on their motivations for engagement with ALMPs was created by Snape (1998). This framework was shaped around the impact of commercial motivations and corporate social responsibility when considering why employers engaged with programmes to employ those out of work, suggesting that these factors were the driving forces behind employer decision-making. The organisations were categorised as being socially motivated, commercially motivated but socially responsible, entirely commercially motivated and the last categorisation applied to organisations that simply did not have the resources, capacity or capability to engage with the initiative.

Van Der Aa and Van Berkel (2014) also created a framework through which to understand the motivations for employer engagement with ALMPs based on motivating factors. Their work explored the nature of innovative work activation schemes designed to encourage employers to recruit and train people who had been unemployed. Similarly to Snape (1998), they identify four categories of

employers based on the motivation for their engagement. These are employers simply keen to hire new workers and thus are willing to engage with the process, those who are keen to cut costs through use of state incentives attached to the ALMP, those who have sought to engage because of their sense of CSR, and finally those who present a mix of those three primary motivations.

In critically evaluating the validity and utility of these frameworks, it is important first to recognise that the motivating factors identified within them have merit based in existing evidence, both around ALMP engagement broadly, and apprenticeship engagement specifically. For example, the key factors identified by Snape are correlated as being significant to employer engagement with ALMPs within work undertaken by Simms (2017), who's research in this area focused on the employment of young people, with some reference to apprenticeship uptake and with evident crossover with apprenticeship engagement literature. Simms notes that employers are typically motivated broadly by both the business/HR case for engagement, such as incentives around training, and by a sense of corporate social responsibility to provide training opportunities to young staff. This also echoes the findings of the four state sponsored surveys on employer motivations for apprenticeship engagement (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022). This presents strong evidence supporting the contention that Snape's (1998) framework captures two of the most significant motivating factors driving engagement of ALMPs, and indeed apprenticeships.

The Van Der Aa and Van Berkel (2014) framework is similarly supported by the work of Simms (2017) given that their framework also emphasises the CSR and HR cases for engagement, with the HR argument divided into two further categories on financial incentives and the need to recruit. These more precise motivations are also shown to be important to apprenticeship engagement within available quantitative research within Scotland and across the UK. Richmond (2018;2020) for example has shown that financial incentives can encourage employers to hire and train apprentices, whilst a range of research has shown that recruitment and development needs are also factors that appear to influence employer decision-making and behaviour in this regard (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018;

Gambin & Hogarth, 2017; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; Chankseliani and Anuar, 2019).

Even though the motivating factors that are considered, evaluated and measured within the frameworks created by Snape (1998) and Van Der Aa and Van Berkel (2014) are important aspects of the discussions around ALMP engagement and apprenticeship engagement, these frameworks remain insufficient for several reasons. The key failing of these models is that they simultaneously consider engagement in too broad a sense in one respect, and too narrowly in another. By focusing on very broad categories of motivation, not only do they fail to capture any themes that may fall outside of these categories, but they fail to pick up on the subthemes attached that may offer much more specific insight into how different motivations interact and drive decision making. These approaches also consider motivation too narrowly, as they do not consider any dissuading factors and do not allow for the possibility that an employer may be motivated by one, or all, of these motivating factors to engage and still not engage. If motivating factors are significant, so too are demotivating factors, and there must be room to acknowledge that employers can be motivated by some factors and demotivated by others, and that whether they engage with an ALMP may not align with their attitude or ideological position regardless. The relationship between motivation, attitude and employer decisions is more nuanced and complex than can be captured by these typologies.

The second type of framework focuses primarily on measuring the level of participation with an ALMP, with narrow scope to also include some consideration of attitude. This approach is seen with the frameworks created by Martin (2004) and Nelson (2013). These frameworks are scales that categorise each organisation based on the extent to which it engages with an ALMP. There is also some consideration of attitude within each of these typologies, as Martin's (2004) includes a category that considers non-institutional support for an ALMP, whilst Nelson's (2013) includes a classification that acknowledges the possibility that non-engagement may be driven by ideological opposition. The strength of these models is straightforward in that they allow level of participation to be identified,

measured and compared. These forms of typology may be most useful for example if primarily attempting to measure uptake of a new labour market policy. Additionally, Martin's (2004) research provides strong evidence showing organisational attitude towards an ALMP can impact the decision to engage with it or not, demonstrating that attitude is a specific factor worthy of consideration within any comprehensive framework.

Despite these benefits however, this approach remains insufficient as a tool for measuring employment engagement, particularly within the context of this research project. Whilst these frameworks are adequate tools for measuring participation, with a glimpse of consideration of attitude, this is the limit of their utility. Neither of these approaches provide a framework that can be used to determine what factors drive employer decision-making, an element that is central to this work. Unfortunately, within these frameworks, employer motivations are not considered and structural forces that drive engagement are not factored in, therefore there is no scope to measure or evaluate the complex dynamics that influence employer choices.

It is therefore proposed that a framework is required that can be used to measure employer engagement with apprenticeships that examines employer participation with apprenticeships, employer attitudes towards apprenticeships, and that can facilitate a thorough analysis of surface level motivating factors to uncover the structural forces and causal mechanisms that drive employer behaviour. The only framework within ALMP engagement literature deemed to meet the criteria required was therefore Bredgaard's (2017) typology.

### Bredgaard's Typology

From the available literature on apprenticeship engagement with ALMPs, Bredgaard's (2017) typology stood out above the rest as being likely to have the greatest utility for the critical evaluation of apprenticeship engagement. Other frameworks and research around employer engagement with ALMPs have tended to

focus primarily on either employer reasons for engagement (Snape, 1998; Van Der Aa & Van Berkel, 2014) or the extent of employer engagement (Martin, 2004; Nelson, 2013). These frameworks limit the scope of understanding by focusing narrowly on either the why or what of employer engagement, without allowing a combined holistic analysis to present a comprehensive picture. Additionally, there is a lack of nuance incorporated as these models do not consider either potential demotivating factors, or the possibility that there may be conflicting components at play.

Having outlined the limitations of other theories, categorisations and frameworks based around employer engagement, it is then important to explain how Bredgaard's typology overcomes some of these issues. The Bredgaard framework was selected as it allows for all key aspects of engagement to be considered, which therefore means that this provides the best opportunity for a fully comprehensive understanding of apprenticeship engagement to be developed. It is suggested that this framework is more nuanced than the alternative approaches, as it measures whether an employer engages with a policy or initiative, and what the employer's attitude is towards this policy or initiative. There is then scope from this point to analyse what drives the behaviour of each type of employer, which has been an important aim of the project. Participation, attitude as well as motivating and demotivating factors, can all therefore be considered and critically evaluated.

Most crucially, this framework acknowledges that there may be seemingly conflicting components within employer behaviour, by accounting for the possibility that an employer may hold a positive view of a policy or initiative, but not engage with it, and vice-versa. Employers may also be simultaneously influenced by motivating and demotivating factors, creating layers of complexity within decision making that only a holistic approach could hope to capture. The nuance found within Bredgaard's typology allows for a more thorough investigation of apprenticeship engagement than would be enabled by other models and can facilitate a level of critical analysis not currently found within research that considers apprenticeship engagement in Scotland.



The typology separates the employers into four categories; passive employers, dismissive employers, committed employers and sceptical employers. The axis below demonstrates the way that these employer types relate to one another in terms of employer attitude and employer participation.

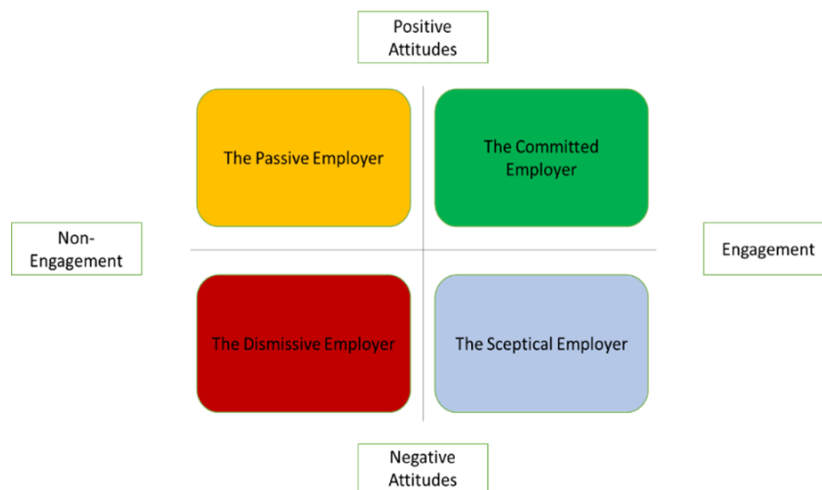


Figure 2. Bredgaard's Typology.

Bredgaard explains that the committed employer has a positive attitude towards the ALMP and actively participates and engages with the programme. Similarly to what is found within the frameworks of Snape (1998) and Van Der Aa and Van Berkel (2014), and in conclusions drawn by Simms (2017), Bredgaard suggests that corporate social responsibility may be a factor in driving the behaviour of this type of employer, though the way that the framework has been used within this project has allowed for a range of differing motivations and influences to be considered. The employers within the context of apprenticeships may be likely to recruit a proportionately higher level of apprentices than all other employer types and may also work with the Government and skills bodies to strengthen ties and improve these programs. This is therefore the ideal type of employer from the perspective of the government.

The sceptical employer also participates and engages, however does not share the positive attitude of the committed employer. Bredgaard (2017) offers an

explanation through his research of why a sceptical employer would have a negative attitude towards an ALMP but still choose to engage, claiming that the two primary reasons for this would be because employers may be seeking favours on other issues, or because they wish to prevent an unfavourable outcome if punished because of their non-engagement. This explanation may apply adequately to ALMPs broadly, but it seems unlikely to fully explain sceptical employer engagement with apprenticeships in Scotland. It is improbable within the context of apprenticeships in Scotland that many employers would choose to engage to curry favour with the state down the line. It is more plausible that an employer might view apprenticeships negatively but choose to engage with them because they wish to enjoy a perceived short-term benefit of hiring and training an apprentice. It is therefore important to identify potential perceived benefits for sceptical employers, and to remain open-minded as to the possibility of other motivating factors and structural forces influencing employer behaviour.

The passive employer holds a positive view of the ALMP but does not actively engage with it. Bredgaard suggests that this may be caused by a lack of knowledge the ALMP, or by an insufficient understanding of how to engage in an effective way. It could also be caused by a perception that the ALMP is not relevant to the functioning of the company. This seems logically likely to cover the key reasons for this form of employer behaviour in relation to apprenticeship engagement. For example, an employer in a non-traditional apprenticeship industry may support in principle the idea of hiring apprentices to improve the skillset within the organisation but may be unaware of such an option being available. There will also be scope to capture and consider any other dynamics or forces that influence a passive approach to engagement using this framework.

Finally, the dismissive employer holds a negative view of the ALMP and does not engage with it. Bredgaard notes that such organisations are largely motivated by short term profit maximization, thus cannot be swayed by arguments around corporate social responsibility. Understanding this type of employer through Scottish apprenticeship engagement, this employer may pursue a strategy of minimizing labour costs to increase profits, with little concern for workforce

development or altruistic endeavour. The negative attitudes and refusal to engage of these organisations makes this type of employer the least ideal scenario for the government, and changing their position represents a significant challenge to those hoping to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunity available to people in Scotland.

There are a range of frameworks that measure and evaluate employer engagement with ALMPs that could have been selected for use within this research project, and some of the key typologies have been discussed within the previous subchapter. Each framework outlined presents both strengths and weaknesses. The frameworks created by Snape (1998) and Van Der Aa and Van Berkel (2014) would be helpful for identifying and measuring the influence of key broad motivating factors driving employer engagement with apprenticeships, and the available evidence on employer engagement with apprenticeships demonstrates that the focus of these typologies on staff development and corporate social responsibility is justified (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018; Gambin & Hogarth, 2017; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; Chankseliani and Anuar, 2019). However, because these models measure motivations in a broad sense, whilst failing to account for factors that may discourage engagement and the complex ways in which these dynamics can interact, the frameworks of Snape (1998) and Van Der Aa and Van Berkel (2014) would only be able to support a partial assessment of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. Martin (2004) and Nelson (2013) meanwhile created frameworks that can measure and evaluate an employer's level of participation with an ALMP, and which account for attitude, however without the scope to really understand and analyse employer motivation.

It is argued that the advantage of the typology created by Bredgaard (2017) is that it pulls together the key strengths offered by other frameworks and condenses them all into one effective and superior tool. This firstly allows for the categorisation of employers based on engagement and non-engagement with apprenticeships, in much the same way as the frameworks of Martin (2004) and Nelson (2013). However, whilst the Martin and Nelson models touch on attitude in a limited way, Bredgaard's typology explicitly seeks to measure employer attitudes,

whilst also acknowledging and facilitating analysis of the fact that the relationship between participation and attitude can be complex. Employers might hold a positive attitude yet not engage with apprenticeships, or may hold a negative view yet still choose to engage with them.

Once employers have been categorised on this basis, there is then scope for a more meaningful analysis of motivating factors and structural forces influencing employer decision making as profiles can be built around each category employer. This then allows for a more thorough appraisal of motivating factors than is accounted for within the models of Snape (1998) and Van Der Aa and Van Berkel (2014). Additionally, there is again room for a more nuanced analysis that recognises that employers may be encouraged to engage by some factors whilst being discouraged by others, and that a holistic approach is required to truly capture how and why employer decisions are made around apprenticeship engagement.

Having outlined and justified the use of this typology, it is important to note that this project has opted to use Bredgaard's framework in a slightly different way to how it was initially deployed. The utility of this framework was initially tested by Bredgaard on the engagement of Danish employers with an ALMP introduced by the national government using a quantitative survey. This allowed for employers to be categorised, but their motives, thoughts and concerns went unexplored. This project has sought to test the utility of Bredgaard's typology to categorise large Scottish employers in relation to apprenticeship engagement using a qualitative case study approach, however this research goes beyond simple classification. By engaging in qualitative research, particularly with the use of semi-structured interviews within these case study organisations, a more extensive analysis is provided that demonstrates not only where these employers sit within Bredgaard's framework, but also what characteristics are found within each employer type, creating employer profiles of behaviour for each quadrant. Because the typology provided the structure required to categorise the employers, the aggregated data gathered for each employer type could be analysed to reveal the key structural

forces and causal mechanisms that drive apprenticeship engagement among different types of large employer in Scotland.

There are however limitations to this model, most notably that it treats engagement as static, when recruitment, training and workplace learning is cyclical rather than fixed. This issue within the model is understandable, as Bredgaard's (2017) research was quantitative and sought to provide a 'shot-in-time' analysis of ALMP engagement in the Netherlands. It is argued that this framework can be utilised to categorise employers based on their attitude towards, and engagement with, apprenticeships using qualitative research. This type of research, using case studies and semi-structured interviews, allows for the analysis of rich data that can capture the nuance missing from available quantitative studies (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022) to develop a more thorough understanding of employer decision making around apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. Given the Government-led focus on increasing apprenticeship figures, it is also important to not only understand current employer attitudes and engagement with apprenticeships, but also any possible changes in recent years, or what might drive change in future. It is possible then that Bredgaard's typology will need to be developed further to provide that flexibility to track any changes in how employers perceive or engage with apprenticeships.

### Literature Review: Conclusion

This chapter has discussed and critically evaluated the key literature and research that is currently available relating to apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. This has included discussion of the current level of engagement, motivating factors behind employer decision making and attitudes towards apprenticeships in Scotland. It is shown that the academic research available on apprenticeship engagement is sporadic and disconnected. The most detailed and useful research has been commissioned by state bodies on behalf of the UK and Scottish governments in the form of quantitative surveys. These are useful for identifying key issues that likely influence employer behaviour, but it has been shown that a

more thorough and nuanced examination of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland is required to deepen current understanding and to reveal the key causal mechanisms and structural forces that drive employer decision making. It is also argued that a more considered, systematic approach to apprenticeship engagement research is needed, which is why Bredgaard's typology was selected as a framework to categorise employers and allow for a more thorough analysis of the behaviour of each employer type.

From this literature review, four key research questions emerge. These relate explicitly to testing an academic framework for evaluating apprenticeship engagement, identifying the key causal mechanisms, structural forces and compelling motivating factors that drive apprenticeship engagement, understanding if profiles of employer behaviour can be developed, and the need to better understand what interventions may increase apprenticeship engagement.

- Can the typology of Bredgaard be used as a useful tool to categorise employers in terms of apprenticeship engagement?
- Can the key causal mechanisms, structural forces and compelling motivating factors that drive apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in Scotland be revealed and understood?
- Is there a relationship between the employer types, identified through Bredgaard's typology, and the factors that drive apprenticeship engagement, that would allow for employer profiles to be developed?
- Can conclusions and evidence-based inferences be made as to what interventions may improve the attitudes and engagement levels of each employer type with regard to apprenticeships?

## Chapter 3. Research Design

### Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the research design of the thesis. Each decision taken in relation to project design, data collection and data analysis will be explained and justified, drawing on academic literature to support the choices where appropriate. In summary, this is a qualitative research project undertaken from a critical realist perspective. It involves eleven case studies of large employers based in Scotland. Each case study is made up of interviews, primarily with employees with some influence or experience of apprenticeship engagement within the organisation, however there are some cases studies that include interviews with people who do not work for the company but have a relevant connection that makes them worthwhile participants. Additional documentary analysis and secondary sources are also included within the cases to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the factors at play within each case.

In addition to the case studies, 21 supplementary interviews were conducted with other relevant stakeholders including employer organisations, trade unions, skills practitioners, HR staff and former or current apprentices. 60 interviews were conducted in total. Gathered data was then analysed using Fletcher's (2016) three step process, which involved a flexible deductive approach grounded in critical realist theory. This process required a prepared list of thematic codes that were used to direct data analysis, whilst also allowing for other themes to be identified as significant. This list is provided as *Appendix A*, and was created by drawing from the issues, themes, concepts, theories, and research previously discussed within the *Introduction* and *Literature Review* chapters.

### Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers to the set of beliefs, values and assumptions that underpin a researcher's approach to all aspects of their work (Saunders, Lewis &

Thornhill, 2012). This research project has been undertaken from a critical realist perspective, and this section of the thesis will explain this concept and critically justify it as the chosen philosophical position. This subchapter will outline the ontological and epistemological beliefs that underpin the research undertaken, therefore providing an overview of the research philosophy of the thesis. This will demonstrate precisely how critical realism has shaped the research design.

At a base level, ontology is the study of 'what is' (Al-Saadi, 2014), driving at the very basis of what one believes about the nature of reality (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012; Levers, 2013) and how society functions (Scotland, 2012). The key point of contention here is whether reality is to be understood externally or internally, meaning that to some reality occurs separate to human experience, whereas others argue that reality is merely the product of individual consciousness (Poonamallee, 2009). This is important, as the way we think of the world naturally influences what we believe can be known and understood about the world. This in turn impacts how we believe research should be designed, what types of theories might have value, and what ethical principles should be central to any research process (Fleetwood, 2005). Ontology is therefore pivotal to all learning, and to all research projects.

Two of the most articulated philosophical positions in contemporary research, positivism and interpretivism, take diametrically opposed stances on ontology. Positivist ontology holds that a single, tangible, measurable, and quantifiable reality exists (Park, Konge & Artino, 2019). From the positivist perspective, reality exists regardless of our beliefs or understanding of it (Al-Saadi, 2014). This is disputed by interpretivists, who take a more relativist stance, arguing that reality does exist, but it is experienced subjectively as part of human consciousness, therefore what we perceive as reality is socially constructed (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Interpretivists also contend that no shared social reality exists, only individual interpretations of it (Al-Saadi, 2014). The position taken within this research aligns with critical realist philosophy, leaning more towards a positivist stance in this instance, by acknowledging that reality exists regardless of how we perceive it (Fletcher, 2016). Whilst interpretivism offers some interesting



arguments about the role of meanings and symbols in shaping our understanding of reality, this does not change reality itself, merely our perception of it.

Whilst ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, epistemology is instead fixated on the nature of knowledge (Al-Saadi, 2014). Assumptions about what constitutes knowledge logically impacts how one believes knowledge and understanding can be acquired, thus how research should be conducted. Epistemology is not solely invested in what knowledge is however, but also how one can reach conclusions, or hold beliefs or opinions, that can be intellectually justified (Greco, 2017). It is evident that just because somebody believes something does not mean that such a belief constitutes knowledge, even if it happens to be true. For example, a person can make a random prediction about the weather, or about what motivates employers to engage with apprenticeships, the prediction may come true, but that does not mean that their claim had an intellectual basis that would allow it to be deemed as real knowledge. What matters is how the knowledge is attained. Understanding of what knowledge is deemed legitimate or 'rational' is at the heart of the philosophical debate of epistemology (Goldman, 2019).

Those who adopt a positivist ontological position are typically aligned with an objectivist epistemological standpoint. This position is based on the premise that knowledge is objective, tangible and measurable (Hiller, 2016). Researchers of this persuasion therefore tend to focus on testing hypotheses to demonstrate universal laws. Interpretivist and subjectivist researchers however would dispute these assumptions, instead arguing that all knowledge is socially constructed, and their work often focuses on deriving meaning and perspectives over consciously attempting to create generalisable conclusions (Williams, 2000). Whilst critical realists tend to concur with positivists when considering ontology, this is not the case in relation to epistemology, as the narrow conception of knowledge and shallow belief in universal laws is not credible for those who adhere to critical realism (Danermark et al, 2002). An extreme objectivist stance therefore runs the risk of assuming correlation is causation. Albert et al (2020) have made an interesting contribution to the body of critical realist conceptual theory in noting

that it is necessary for critical realists to accept that knowledge is fallible given its social construction, but they also explain that all knowledge is 'positioned' by social power relations which can produce systemic distortions. This thesis has been undertaken with an epistemological position that understands the social construction of knowledge, but the work goes beyond mere description of how employers engage with apprenticeships and contributes to existing knowledge by identifying the causal structures and mechanisms driving employer behaviour.

Critical realism is ultimately a research philosophy that seeks to combine different aspects of positivism and interpretivism (Fletcher, 2016). It is closely associated with the work of Bhaskar (1979), who's influential book '*A Realist Theory of Science*' defined the key tenets of the approach and has had a profound impact on social science since. Critical realism contends that the world, and what happens within it, exist, and occur, regardless of our knowledge of it all (Easton, 2010), whilst that knowledge is conditioned by historical context and social structures. It acknowledges the positivist position about the objectivity of reality, whilst accepting the interpretivist position that knowledge is socially constructed (Fryer, 2022). Critical realism rejects the positivist argument that contends only observable and quantifiable knowledge has value, whilst going further than interpretivism's focus on providing explanations by determining the causes and structures that drive a specific phenomenon, such as engagement with apprenticeships. Critical realism proposes that knowledge can be attained by observing phenomena and interpreting meaning, allowing researchers to explain the causal mechanisms and elements of reality that create what is observed (Lawani, 2020).

It is important then to briefly explain the critical realist perspective on reality and causal structures. The relationship between what is real and what is observable is at the core of critical realist philosophy (Zhang, 2022). What constitutes reality for critical realists is broken into three distinct parts: empirical, actual, and real (Fletcher, 2016). The real dimension contains the structures and entities consisting of properties which give them power, which in turn impacts upon other structures as a causal mechanism. This level of reality cannot be observed, but this domain

has the power to activate mechanisms that impact other structures, which is when it can become observable (Haigh et al, 2019). The three elements of reality within critical realism are often portrayed as parts of an iceberg, and the real domain is the bottom, deepest part of this depiction (Fletcher, 2016). It is this realm that critical researchers are working towards, digging through data to uncover the real causes of what is observable, buried below that which is much easier to spot on the surface.

The actual domain then consists of the events that have been created by the causal mechanisms of the real (Haigh et al, 2019). This is the domain that most closely resembles positivist theory, contending that events happen at this level regardless of whether human beings recognise, acknowledge, or understand them. For example, a popular philosophical question is posed that asks if a tree falls in the forest and nobody is around to hear it fall, did it make a noise? Positivists and critical realists would resoundingly agree that it did, regardless of whether that noise was experienced and understood by a human being.

The final domain then is the empirical dimension, which is the point at which events and phenomena can be experienced and understood (Raduescu & Vessey, 2009). This is where researchers can observe and interpret what occurs, and critical realism acknowledges that the way events and knowledge are understood at this level is shaped by historical and social context (Brons Kringelum & Brix, 2020). Within this thesis, the empirical level is where data has been gathered through case studies and interviews. Then through the data analysis process, this leads to the real domain, which helps to explain what causes the themes and ideas expressed in the interviews and that are present within the documentary analysis.

The fundamental aim of critical realism is to explain real world events and phenomena by identifying the underlying causal mechanisms that have produced real-world outcomes (Moghadam-Saman, 2020). This research has been conducted using this framework of understanding, acknowledging that unseen structures and entities have a causal impact on what we can observe in relation to apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in Scotland. To increase understanding of the

actual and the observable, i.e., how employers engage with apprenticeships, one must seek to understand what lies beneath within the *real* domain.

### Research Design: Qualitative Approach

The thesis has used qualitative data to broaden understanding of apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in Scotland. As is demonstrated within the *Literature Review*, there is research available that considers apprenticeship engagement from a quantitative perspective (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; FSB, 2018). These publications are useful in that they help to identify broad issues that influence employer decision-making processes, but they do not provide sufficient depth or nuance, meaning that the extent to which different factors drive apprenticeship engagement remains unknown. It was deemed likely that there would be causal mechanisms and structural factors that had not been picked up, or had gone underreported, within available quantitative work because researchers were not empowered to seek the level of detail required to reach such findings. Quantitative research can be effective for evaluating the attitudes and opinions of a large population (Verhoef & Casebeer, 1997), which is why the available quantitative research does provide a useful overview of key issues for employers, but a more thorough, in-depth investigation was required to build on this knowledge, which is why a qualitative approach was chosen (Cleland, 2017).

Qualitative research allows for the in-depth examination of the experiences and motivations of people (Bailey et al, 2010), which was deemed essential for truly understanding apprenticeship engagement and employer behaviour. Taking a qualitative approach allowed participants the chance to express their thoughts and ideas, share their experiences, and present nuanced positions in their own words (Cleland, 2017). It was also deemed important that during the interview process, there was sufficient scope to press for further detail where necessary at certain points, to clarify exactly what the participant meant and to build evidence of the exact nature of the relationships that exist between the dynamics at play (Turner,

2010). This approach was also appropriate given that the critical realist philosophical perspective acknowledges that qualitative research is useful for obtaining rich explanations than can help to identify causal mechanisms (Maxwell, 2004).

### Research Design: Case Studies

This research was principally undertaken using case studies. A case study is a unit of analysis to improve understanding an issue or phenomenon within its own context using multiple data sources (Rowley, 2002). Patton and Appelbaum (2003) have made a convincing case in arguing the merits of using case study research within a management setting, noting that they provide the opportunity to examine a process or phenomenon in a comprehensive and holistic manner. The key defining element of what makes a case study is the requirement of a clearly defined contextual boundary (Flyvbjerg, 2011). The boundary chosen here was the organisation. These organisations had to be employers that pay the Apprenticeship Levy in Scotland to meet the criteria of being large employers. All evidence and data gathered within these case studies related to the decision-making processes, behaviours, and attitude of these organisations.

Ghuri (2004) contends that ‘a case study is not a methodological choice, but rather a choice of object to be studied’ (P.1). Given that this research has sought to explain employer behaviour, prioritizing depth of understanding, the decision to select employer organisations as the object to be studied was a logical one. This allowed for the depth of analysis not provided in existing literature. Case studies were ultimately chosen as they allow for a thorough evaluation of the attitudes and behaviours of an organisation in a way that can provide valuable insight beyond the chosen boundary and context (Cousin, 2005). Eleven case studies were conducted across the research. In each one, the organisation that was the focus of the case study granted access for the research and consented to the work being undertaken. These organisations represent the unit of analysis within this thesis. Within this boundary, evidence was sought that provided insight into the whether

the organisation engages with apprenticeships, the level of that engagement, individual and prevailing attitudes towards apprenticeships, and the factors that impact decisions taken in relation to apprenticeship engagement. This therefore involved input from senior staff and those in HR roles, line managers, trainers, and apprentices. It also allowed for the collation and analysis of documentary data, both private internal documentation within the organisation, and publicly available sources that spoke to policies, practices and attitudes and behaviours within the organisation.

It is also important that when conducting case study research, organisations must be chosen purposefully rather than at random (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003). Each organisation was therefore chosen carefully in line with the aims and strategy of the research. In designing the research, a clear focus was placed on finding suitable organisations across a range of different sectors, industries, and geographical locations. It was deemed important to ensure that different types of employers and different apprenticeship frameworks were considered to allow data gathered to represent as broad a range of perspectives and experiences as possible. It was also deemed important that the organisations chosen were not purely based within Scotland's central belt, and that both urban and rural experiences were considered within this work. This was important to ensure that data reflect the experiences of employers across Scotland, as there are structural differences for recruitment and training in Scotland's rural communities compared to the inner-cities and former industrial heartlands (Kleinart et al, 2018).

Case study employers were selected and contacted through different means to prevent selection bias that may negatively impact results. SDS contributed half of the funding for this thesis, in conjunction with the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science, and offered support to initiate contact with numerous organisations that they had developed strong relationships with through apprenticeship schemes. However, a conscious choice was taken not to overly rely on this approach as it was deemed likely that a high proportion of organisations with strong links to SDS were likely to be committed to and enthusiastic about apprenticeship engagement, thus this would have risked over-representation of this group. Other organisations were

recruited through personal and professional contacts, trade unions, and pro-business groups. The organisations that participated were recruited on the basis that they would not be named within any publication, thus will only be referred to by an assigned letter as it is important ethically to adhere to anonymity agreements (Kang & Hwang, 2023). Access was arranged with a point of contact within each organisation who was made fully aware of the scope and purpose of the project. Within *Appendix B*, a table is attached with the details of each organisation, their pseudonym, revenue levels, ownership model, information on whether they engage with a trade union, and if they pay the real living wage. Interview participants and broad job roles are also included within this document.

The key method of data collection used for each case study was semi-structured interviews. For each case study, between three and six semi structured interviews were conducted. 39 interviews were conducted as part of the case studies overall. The number of interviews across each case study was not even, and the number of people interviewed related to each organisation differed from case to case. Some participant organisations were willing to facilitate more interviews than others, however all case studies included enough interviews with staff who had a responsibility for, input into, or experience of, the apprenticeship programme or the apprenticeship engagement decision making process within the organisation. Every case study has at least one interview with a senior figure with oversight of the decisions on training and recruitment, including chief executive officers, directors, HR directors and other senior HR roles. Each case study also includes interviews with HR staff with direct experience of the decision-making process, who also often have a responsibility for managing the recruitment and training of apprentices. In all instances interviews were conducted with staff with differing roles and responsibilities to ensure different, rich perspectives on the topic. Regardless of number of interviews conducted, every case study provided ample data to provide an accurate evaluation of apprenticeship engagement within the organisation.

Interviews were conducted in some instances with those at mid-management level, such as line managers, floor supervisors and training managers. These participants

were included because they had the most direct experience of managing apprentices, which meant that their input was highly valuable for developing understanding of both why and how these organisations engage with apprenticeships. Some apprentices were also interviewed as part of the case studies, again because they had a unique perspective and could speak to their perceptions of the motivations and attitudes of more senior staff within the organisation. In other cases, interviews were conducted with trade union representatives, training partners, subcontractors, and in one instance, a representative for the Department for Work and Pensions who works closely with the company involved, primarily to help them recruit for apprentice roles. Even though some of these participants did not work for the case study organisation directly, each provided insight into the decisions, attitudes, and motivations of those that do work for the organisation. This input was deemed sufficiently valuable to be included within the boundary of the case study. Each interview provided a fresh perspective on how large employers engage with apprenticeships. This broad range of interviews helped to ensure that each case study truly reflected the attitudes and behaviours of the organisation. All interviews were conducted on Zoom, a service that facilitates online meetings.

Interviews within a research context can be best understood as conversations with a purpose (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982), an interaction between researcher and participant that is designed to enable the interviewee to provide insight, knowledge and experience that has value to the research. Semi-structured interviews were selected to form a significant part of the case studies as this approach provided a structure to ensure that the discussion was relevant and valuable, whilst also allowing a degree of flexibility that enabled participants to share their experiences and possibly raise issues and discussion points that had not previously been considered (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Structured interviews are used by some researchers because they allow for a greater degree of standardisation (Rashidi et al, 2014), however because these interviews were being conducted with employers with a range of different roles and responsibilities within companies, and because there was a desire not to constrict the ability of participants to raise issues outside the scope of the thematic list, a semi-



structured approach was preferred. This was important to allow the research to properly build on previous research undertaken on motivations for apprenticeship engagement (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; FSB, 2018) as a key critique of previous work is that participants were not enabled to provide sufficient depth, nuance, and reasoning in their responses. Semi structured interviews also helped to corroborate and challenge past research, and allowed words, concepts, and statistics to ‘come alive’ (Carruthers, 2007).

When engaged in the data collection process, it was important to structure the interviews and questions in the most effective way possible. For semi-structured interviews, there was a need to build the interview primarily around open-ended questions that were worded clearly, using language that was as neutral as possible (Turner & Hagstrom-Schmidt, 2022). Open ended questions were important because they do not constrict the participant, empowering them to delve into whatever level of detail they believe to be appropriate (Alsaawi, 2014). Neutral language was also a requirement to try to ensure that the participant was not swayed by what they perceived the interviewer’s perspective to be (Fox, 2006). When conducting the interviews, it was also important to maintain neutral body language and to not visibly react to what the interviewee was saying, and efforts were made to ensure this was the case. Interviews were started in a gentle fashion, beginning with easier questions based around simple ideas and concepts to help the participant become accustomed to the setup and to feel more comfortable, before going on to discuss more complex or contentious ideas (Gill et al, 2008).

The interviews were designed and conducted to elicit rich and valuable data. A set of key questions was compiled, using open-ended questions and neutral language to encourage the interviewee to explain how the organisation engages with apprenticeships and to elicit their opinion and understanding of the issues at hand. Given that interviews were conducted with a broad range of workers in different roles, the interview questions had to be calibrated to suit the different responsibilities of those being interviewed. A sample list of questions however is available within *Appendix C* showing the broad structure of most interviews

conducted. These questions were altered when this was deemed necessary, dependent upon the participant's role and experience. When doing the interviews, if a participant made a particularly interesting point or demonstrated a unique perspective in a way that was not anticipated, the structure of the research design then allowed for follow up questions that were not pre-scripted. Each interview participant was provided with a *Participant Information Sheet*, which detailed plainly the scope of the project and why they were being asked to take part, as well as a *Privacy Notice*, explaining how details and data would be safely stored. All also signed and returned a *Consent Form*. Copies of this documentation can be found within *Appendix D*, *Appendix E* and *Appendix F* respectively.

To present a multi-faceted and layered case study, it was important to ensure that data was drawn from more than one source (Crowe et al, 2011). Utilising different data collection methods helps to challenge or corroborate findings in a way that increases the value of the research. Documentary evidence allows a researcher to evaluate and analyse files, statistics, records, and images (Ahmed, 2010) and this can be particularly useful in supplementing other forms of research. Data gathered through semi-structured interviews was then augmented by collating and analysing accessible secondary evidence including reports, internal memos and recruitment materials, meeting minutes, web analysis, newspaper articles, job advertisements, videos, podcasts, and academic research. Some case study participants offered access to private company documentation on the basis that the document was never directly published, though in such instances it was agreed that these documents could be referred to in writing. Other documents were accessed online, including company reports and publications. There were other valuable data sources that helped to add to the wealth of data compiled for each case study.

Company websites proved to be a rich avenue for mining useful data in relation to company values, recruitment drives, CSR initiatives, upcoming projects, diversity commitments and training programmes. In some instances, newspaper articles were found written about the organisation that related to apprenticeship engagement. For two case studies, previous academic research on the organisations relating to employment practices were located and became part of

the secondary data analysis. YouTube videos and podcasts were also used when they were made about case study organisations and related either directly or indirectly to apprenticeships. Some of these publicly available sources posed a problem as they represented rich sources of data and insight but referencing them would have run the risk of identifying the company, contravening agreements made to maintain anonymity. They were therefore still considered, analysed, and included within discussion, but have not been fully referenced for this reason. A detailed breakdown of precise secondary sources used within each case study cannot be provided, in some instances to protect the identity of the organisation, in others to protect the identities of workers who have provided sensitive information and material to the research. *Appendix G* provides an overview of documents gathered and included within the analysis in a way that protects the identity of individual participants and participant organisations.

It is also important to note the challenge of using Bredgaard's typology (2017) to categorise employers. When Bredgaard first tested the utility of this framework, he did so as part of a quantitative research project which allowed clear boundaries to be drawn as to what category each respondent would belong to. Given the subjectivity of qualitative research, and the selection of case study organisations as the unit of analysis, categorising effectively within the framework presented a more difficult challenge within this project and a clear strategy was required from the outset. Bredgaard's typology is built on two fundamental questions, engagement, and attitude, therefore the research design was developed with these concepts in mind. Firstly, there was a need to tailor questions to elicit answers that were as clear as possible on whether the organisation engaged with apprenticeships. This was relatively straightforward, as an organisation either did or did not engage with apprenticeships. It became apparent in some instances that engagement had changed over time, which is considered within the discussion and analysis, however categorising firstly based on engagement or non-engagement was a simple process.

The greater challenge related to categorising employers based upon attitude. The problem posed here was in how best to evaluate the collective attitude of an

organisation. Does such a thing exist? It was necessary to design the individual interviews with this issue in mind, and then analyse data gathered from these discussions to build a picture of how key stakeholders felt within each organisation. Questions were therefore asked to evaluate the attitudes of individual participants within each case study. Each interviewee was asked how they feel about apprenticeships, however the answer given was not taken as the sole indication of the person's attitude. Rather an effort was made to dig deeper, beyond these initial responses to understand if the person held a positive or negative outlook on apprenticeships in theory *and* in practice. This meant asking a series of questions designed to ascertain the person's views of apprenticeships as a real, tangible, and practical method of learning, training and recruitment, as opposed to allowing the often-idealistic vision of the abstract idea of apprenticeships to dominate and potentially skew the analysis at an individual level.

This was proven to be important as the perspectives on the abstract and the real did not always align. For example, some participants began interviews by expressing positive views about apprenticeships in theory but would then spend much of the remainder of the interview expressing discontent with how apprenticeships work in practice. In such instances, it would not be accurate to suggest that these participants held positive views when the reality is much more nuanced. If an individual was aligned in their perspective of apprenticeships, both in theory and in practice, noting them as either having a positive or negative attitude was simple. If, however, there were contradictions within interview data, this question was evaluated primarily based on the person's attitude to apprenticeships in practice. This was done because it was adjudged to be a truer representation of how the interviewees truly felt.

Individual interviews were analysed and evaluated within each case study, along with the secondary sources, and each case study organisation was considered as a single unit of measurement. The overarching analysis was framed around not necessarily identifying the collective attitude, but more about recognising the prevailing attitude within each organisation. The difference here is subtle but

important. A collective attitude would suggest that all stakeholders within an organisation share the same attitude, which is improbable. The prevailing attitude however can be best understood as an attitude which is either held, or at least accepted, by the majority, and which then has the greater influence on decision making. In some instances, this was straightforward. Within Case Study K for example, every person interviewed repeatedly expressed strongly positive views and attitudes regarding apprenticeships. However, in Case Study C, the attitudes of employees differed slightly. In an instance such as this, greater weight was then given to the attitudes of the more senior figures within the organisation, as research in other contexts has shown that the attitudes of leaders can impact how other employees in the organisation feel (Walk, 2023), and because the attitudes of these leaders had greater influence on shaping the decision-making process. Additionally, documents gathered were analysed for themes that may have granted insight into the prevailing attitude and corroborate interview data. Across the case studies, every employer was confidently categorised based on prevailing attitudes within the organisation, determined by an amalgamation of individual attitudes, with greater weight being granted to senior figures when there were different perspectives within the one organisation.

### Concluding Case Study Research

In designing the research, it was decided that no more than 20 and no less than 10 case studies would be completed, however data collection would cease before reaching 20 if it was felt at any point after completing 10 case studies that all 3 points of the following criteria were met;

1. The typology was properly tested, and different types of employers had been represented.
2. Data was deemed able to provide the basis to uncover some key causal mechanisms driving apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in

Scotland.

3. The point of saturation was reached, whereby little to no new information was being gleaned from the collection of new data and the points being heard broadly reiterated positions previously stated by other participants.

Points 2 and 3 were clearly reached by the time data had been collected for case study number eleven. There had been however a difficulty in recruiting organisations to participate in the research that do not engage with apprenticeships. The reason for this is natural, if an organisation has no interest whatsoever in engaging with apprenticeships, it is less likely that they would be keen to see staff time and energy used to discuss apprenticeships. In the upcoming discussion chapters, the point will be made that data collected demonstrates the utility of Bredgaard's typology (2017) and all employers are categorised using the framework. All quadrants of the framework are used to explain the attitude and behaviours of case study organisation, but collected data would have benefited from the perspective of more employers that do not engage with apprenticeships.

Given the difficulty in recruiting organisations like this for full case studies, additional interviews were conducted outside the scope of the case studies with those who could speak to the perspectives of such employers. This included HR staff of companies that were happy to have one staff member participate, but that did not wish to sign up to a full case study. Interviews were also conducted with representatives for trade unions, fair work groups, skills practitioners, learning providers and business representative groups who had a plethora of experience of working with employers who are dismissive of apprenticeships. It was felt that this approach was the best way to ensure that the work is comprehensive in representing the perspectives of different types of employers. The decision was taken then to stop the case study approach after eleven were completed.

## Research Design: Additional Interviews

The case studies were then supplemented with interviews with a range of stakeholders who were identified as having the potential to add value to data already collated. When attempting to recruit participant organisations, and when undertaking data collection, finding employers that were wholly dismissive of apprenticeships that were willing to participate in the research was extremely difficult. Efforts were continually made to reach out to such employers through personal contacts and research outreach staff, both within SDS and the University of Glasgow, but ultimately, only two non-engaged employers were willing to participate in case studies. These case studies capture important attitudes and behaviours of non-engaged employers; however, it was felt that there was a need to speak to more employers or HR staff who held negative views of apprenticeships. It was then decided to conduct interviews with those who could represent non-engaged employers and had knowledge of decision-making processes relating to apprenticeships. Other individual interview participants were also sought to bolster the research.

It quickly became clear that some HR professionals were willing to participate based on a one-off interview, with the permission of their employers, when they would not have been able or willing to engage in a full case study. This allowed more data to be collected from those directly involved in organisational decision making around apprenticeship engagement when the decision taken was to not engage. This may not have been supported by the depth of evidence provided by the case studies, however there was still value in understanding the perspectives of individual HR staff with first-hand experience of the issues at hand. Additionally, the case study interviews were typically organised through HR departments, thus when staff were interviewed within the case study context, there is a possibility that some responses may have been overly charitable to the employer. This can occur as staff may worry about the repercussions if the employer found out that they had portrayed the organisation negatively (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015), even though assurances were given that this would not be the case. The approach taken to conduct supplementary interviews then potentially allowed individual interview

participants the scope to be honest and forthcoming about the organisational reasons for non-engagement.

This issue of participant fear of reprisal was deemed likely to present a greater problem with younger employees that were interviewed. This was factored in when considering interviews with apprentices within the case studies, as these generally provided extremely positive appraisals of their employers. It is certainly possible that these participants were entirely honest in their depiction of their working conditions, however it was concluded that there was a need to capture a broader range of apprentice experiences within collected data. Interviews were therefore set up with individual apprentices and former apprentices outside the scope of the case studies as this allowed for a forthright and honest appraisal of their experiences without fear of repercussions.

The final category of interviewee sought for the supplementary interviews involved those with professional experience of engaging with employers around apprenticeships, this included trade union officials, skills practitioners, fair work advocates, business lobby groups and training providers. The inclusion of these interviews provided valuable additional data for non-engaged employers, as most of these participants had to some degree worked or communicated with non-engaged employers on the topic of apprenticeship engagement. These interviews also provided worthwhile insight regarding data gathered relating to engaged employers. Overall, the decision taken to include interviews with people from these three defined categories allowed for a more diverse array of perspectives to be considered and added to the richness of data collated. 21 supplementary interviews were conducted, bringing the overall total number of interviews to 60. Within *Appendix H*, a list is provided of the pseudonyms and position of every interviewee who took part, both within the case studies and the supplementary interviews.

These interviews were designed and conducted using the same principles as the case study interviews. They were semi-structured to ensure the correct balance of relevance and participant freedom (Ruslin et al, 2022). Questions were shaped to



pose probing open-ended questions that encouraged participants to offer responses with sufficient depth and detail to provide rich data. Neutral language and body language was particularly important when engaging with trade unions and business lobbying groups, given both are typically underpinned by a strong set of philosophical, economic, and political beliefs, increasing the need to remain neutral as the interviewer to encourage the interviewee to be as forthright as possible (Fox, 2006). These interviews were also conducted on Zoom, however there was still a need to ensure participants felt comfortable, and simple questions were used to start the interviews to help settle participants before delving into more complex areas of discussion. With data collection methods fully outlined, it is important to consider the data analysis techniques used.

### Data Analysis - Fletcher's 3-Step Process

It is necessary to provide an overview of the data analysis methods to demonstrate the philosophical consistency that runs throughout the work undertaken. Deciding upon a data analysis process for a critical realist research project that solely uses qualitative data posed challenges, as qualitative research is typically associated with inductive data analysis (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). An inductive approach however would have run the risk of merely recognising and describing themes and meaning within data, without going far enough in getting to the real domain to identify causal structures and mechanisms. It was for this reason that the approach created by Fletcher (2016) for critical realist researchers was used. Fletcher (2016) provided a detailed blueprint of how critical realists might use what she termed 'flexible deductivism' in the coding process of qualitative research. This is a 3-step process that is briefly summarised below.

The first step involved creating a coding list based upon themes derived from existing theory and literature. This thematic coding list is available as *Appendix A*. Flexible deductivism however is not about merely testing these codes to understand whether data corroborates or challenges pre-conceived ideas about apprenticeship engagement in Scotland, but rather this list acted as a starting

guide for what could be searched for when analysing data. This then granted the flexibility to change, remove, edit and supplement these themes in the coding process (Gilgun, 2019). The deductive codes were used to both corroborate and recalibrate existing theory, whilst being flexible enough to allow new, previously unobserved tendencies and causal mechanisms to be identified. The thematic coding list was used to identify 'demi-regularities', which simply involved coding data to identify trends within that list, and to add any new demi-regularities which were found. This is similar to the first stage of thematic content analysis. This was completed using NVivo software to ensure that richness of gathered data was fully captured in the analysis in a structured and strategic way.

Phase two of this analysis was the abduction process, which involved taking the demi-regularities acknowledged within data and providing a theoretical redescription of this content (Fletcher, 2016). This meant that themes that had been identified as appearing within case studies were taken from interview transcripts, or documentary evidence, and framed within the context of existing theory. For example, by taking a series of descriptive quotes from participants discussing their expressed desire to hire apprentices to develop and improve the skillsets and qualifications of staff within the company, and linking this desire to the theoretical discussion around the concept and role of HCT in apprenticeship engagement.

The final phase of this critical realist approach was retroduction, the aim of which is to go beyond noting what is observable in the real domain, to being able to reveal the required contextual conditions for a causal mechanism to shape events and impact upon what we are able to observe in the empirical level (Fletcher, 2016). This brings us to the real domain where a deeper understanding of what truly drives observable phenomena, i.e., what structural forces influence apprenticeship engagement by large employers in Scotland, could be elucidated. This is what separates critical realism from other research philosophies, and it is why Fletcher's model (2016) of analysis is so well suited to this form of research, and why it was selected for use in this instance.

Steps one and two of this approach were used to create a picture of what is observed at the empirical level. Employers were accurately categorised using Bredgaard's typology and the key issues and factors that impact employer decision making and attitudes in relation to apprenticeship engagement in Scotland were identified. These themes were then conceptually reframed so that they could be properly understood within the context of existing academic theory. In step three the analysis was deepened, going beyond description of behaviour, and evaluating what drives, or likely drives, employer behaviour at the surface level. This was achieved in some instances by evaluating key themes and concepts within context and allowing a clear line to be drawn between structural forces and employer behaviour. In other cases, this retrodution was achieved through inference, considering both what is present within data and what is not, allowing logical, evidence-based conclusions to be drawn about what structures and causal mechanisms are most likely to be driving employer behaviour. It is the knowledge created through these processes that provides real-world practical value within the research that will aid policymakers and practitioners in their quest to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities available to people in Scotland.

### Ethical Considerations

As is always the case with social science research, the onus is on the researcher to ensure that no harm results from the research undertaken, particularly for participants (Wassenaar & Mamotte, 2012). When engaging in research around people's working lives of this nature, it would be rare that any particularly traumatic or triggering discussion would be likely to occur, but interviewers must always be careful to ensure they are sensitive to the emotional wellbeing of the participants. The biggest risk for this project was deemed to be the potential for a participant to say something as part of the research and be subsequently identified by their employer, which could possibly result in disciplinary action, and at worst dismissal (Wallace & Sheldon, 2015). The threat of this was deemed low, given that participants would not be identified within the work, the subject matter is not

controversial, and all organisations had consented to the work being undertaken. Regardless, steps were taken to ensure that all participants felt safe, secure, and comfortable to share their experience without fear of retribution.

All participants and organisations have been given pseudonyms within the published work. The study involved a broad range of people from different ethnic backgrounds, which presented a challenge in assigning pseudonyms. On one hand, it would be unfair to erase the experiences and perspectives of those from ethnic minority communities by not including names that are associated with that ethnicity, but there was also a concern that if all participants were assigned a name similar to their own in the sense of ethnic affiliation, this would run the risk of placing people at risk, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds who then may have become more easily identifiable. The decision was therefore taken to broadly represent the ethnic and gender diversity of the participants in the pseudonyms allocated, however these have been allocated entirely at random across all organisations to protect those who took part.

Another possible identifier of people was through job titles. Human resource staff often have different or unique job titles for doing similar roles, which if published unaltered, would have again run the risk of identifying participants. The decision was therefore taken to include broad and standard job titles that convey a person's role without risking inadvertently revealing their identity. Steps were also taken to protect the identities of the organisations that have taken part by not including information that is so specific that it would likely lead to the organisation being identifiable.

In addition to these steps taken, other standard measures were put in place to protect participants. Because the interviews took place on Zoom, there was no physical risk to be considered. Detail of the purpose of the project was shared with all participants and participating organisations. All participants signed and returned consent forms, were told that they could withdraw consent at any time and were told that anything they said could be withdrawn at any point. Data gathered was stored securely on an encrypted device in a locked drawer in line

with best practice around data safekeeping, which is essential to protect the identities of participants (European University Institute, 2022). Once the interviews were transcribed, each recording was deleted to protect the anonymity of the participants. The research design was granted ethical approval by the social science ethics approval panel at the University of Glasgow.

### Research Design: Conclusion

This chapter provides an outline of the research design and a clear explanation for each decision taken. The work has been undertaken from a critical realist philosophical perspective, as it is argued that this provides the basis for the most valuable and thorough analysis of apprenticeship engagement. The decision was taken to conduct qualitative research. The *Literature Review* has set out the available research on apprenticeship engagement in Scotland, and the most significant publications are quantitative surveys that help to provide an overview of relevant factors that influence employer behaviour, but which do not provide the level of nuance and depth required to evaluate the extent to which different issues, structural factors and causal mechanisms drive apprenticeship engagement and employer decision making. This is why a qualitative approach, informed by critical realist theory, was deemed necessary to build upon existing knowledge.

Eleven case studies were conducted, each within a large employer based in Scotland. These organisations served as the unit of analysis within this work. Each case study included between three to six interviews with relevant staff members and associated professionals. The case studies also included documentary analysis of material relating to the organisation and its approach to apprenticeships. This allowed each of these organisations to be accurately placed within Bredgaard's (2017) typology. Supplementary interviews were then conducted outside the scope of the case studies with a broad range of relevant stakeholders to collate more data relating to non-engaged employers, and to ensure that a variety of views and perspectives were considered. 60 interviews were conducted in total across the case studies and supplementary interviews. Data was analysed using Fletcher's 3-

step process of flexible deductivism, which involved identifying demi-regularities within gathered data, followed by abduction and retroduction. This process of analysis ensured that the key causal mechanisms and structural forces that drive apprenticeship engagement could be revealed and understood, and that inferences could be made about other key factors influencing employer behaviour and apprenticeships in Scotland. Upcoming chapters will present data collated as described, starting with a categorisation of employers using Bredgaard's (2017) typology.

## Chapter 4. Case Study Overview: Bredgaard's Typology and Employer Placement

The upcoming five chapters will each present data gathered through this research. Data is presented and discussed without reference to other literature within these chapters to place full emphasis on the thoughts and experiences of participants and the richness added through documentary analysis. Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) argued that people interpret meaning and rationalise experience through 'embedded narrative performances', meaning that they create stories around events and circumstances that allow them to make sense of their lives. If qualitative researchers are to develop an improved understanding of a given phenomenon, then participant perspectives and narratives must be centred within the work to ensure that the nuance and complexity of these narratives can be understood. Given that the primary critique of existing literature around apprenticeship engagement, particularly within the Scottish context, is that it lacks richness and nuance, it was deemed essential that this was provided within this thesis.

Data gathered for each case study was analysed using Fletcher's 3 step approach, beginning with the identification of demi-regularities within these employer organisations using flexible deductivism. Key themes were sought, identified, and drawn from data through analysis of interviews and additional documents, which then allowed each case study employer to be categorised dependent upon whether a prevailing positive or negative view is held regarding apprenticeships, and whether the organisation engages with apprentices, as per Bredgaard's typology. Each employer was then placed within this framework. The diagram below provides a visual representation of the typology.

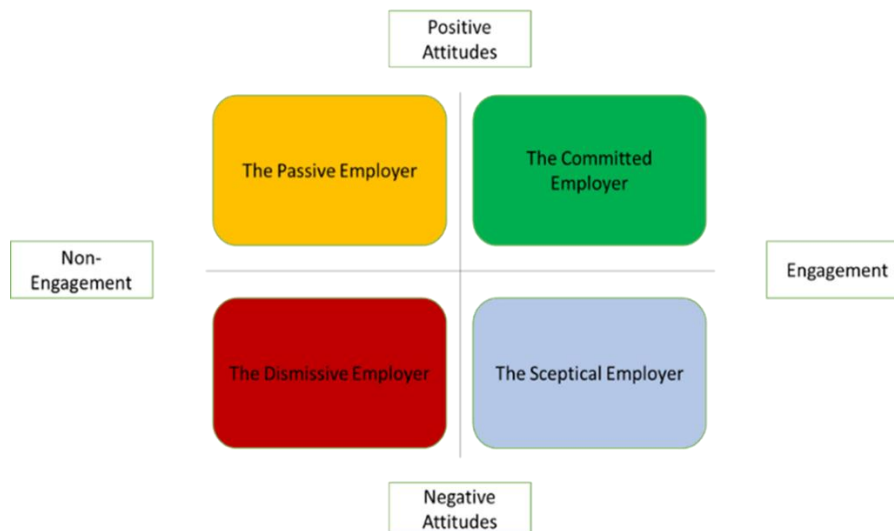


Figure 3. Bredgaard's Typology.

This chapter presents evidence for each case study organisation and, using this evidence, locates each employer within the typology being used. This explains how engagement was measured and how data was used in each instance to determine whether there was a prevailing positive or negative attitude towards apprenticeships within the organisation. Evidence is cited and illustrative quotes are provided throughout the chapter to support the arguments made. Following this, subsequent chapters will discuss motivating factors for engaged and non-engaged employers, detailing the key themes that influence employer decision making relating to apprenticeship engagement for each type of employer.

### Engagement or Non-Engagement

The first question to consider when evaluating each employer for Bredgaard's typology was whether not an organisation engages with apprenticeships. This part of the process was generally quite straightforward, as the key point here rests on a simple yes or no answer regarding whether the employer currently hires and trains apprentices, however there were additional considerations that have also been factored in. When evaluating data, it was easy to ascertain whether the organisations being studied currently hires and trains apprentices through the interviews conducted with staff, particularly when talking to those with direct



responsibility for recruitment, skills, and personnel development. The answers provided were generally clear, easy to interpret, and unambiguous.

*“Yes, of course, we bring in new apprentices every year.”*

Mohammad, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.

*“We do, most of our apprentices are brought in to work in our distilleries but we are looking to grow it all at this point.”*

Gemma, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

*“No, as I’ve said, [the company] just doesn’t do full time contracts and trade staff like that.”*

Greg, Management Level, Case Study H.

*“It’s funny given we do really support apprenticeships, and we try so hard to help people that need our support to find them, but no, we don’t have any ourselves at the moment.”*

Jacynta, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

Of the eleven case study employers being examined, nine engage with apprenticeships whilst only two do not, with the only non-engaging organisations being Employer H and Employer K. This imbalance with a much larger number of participating organisations engaging than not engaging is discussed within the *Research Design Chapter*, as the type of organisation that is keen to engage with research on apprenticeship engagement is always more likely to be an organisation that engages with apprenticeships. Moreover, given that this is a study of large levy-paying employers, it is more likely that this type of employer would choose to engage with apprenticeships due to increased recruitment and skills needs associated with being a larger organisation, and now also potentially to reclaim

costs of the levy, which these organisations are all legally required to pay.

### Engaged Employers

Nine case study employers engaged with apprenticeships. Most organisations were very open and consistent about their engagement, which helped the analytical process. There were however some exceptions. The interviews with staff relating to Employer A were interesting, as one middle-manager stated that the organisation did not currently hire apprentices, though this was corrected by several other staff. It is likely the case that because of the low numbers of apprentices, this manager had simply not realised some apprentices had been hired, or that these workers were in fact apprentices. Interviews and documentary analysis however confirmed that whilst the organisation does currently engage with apprenticeships, it does so to a limited degree.

*“Yeah, we’ve a few going through it . . . this morning I met with some actually, I have two juniors just now in year 3 of their course, doing the apprenticeship.”*

Bruno, Management Level, Case Study A.

*“We aren’t fixated on quantity, you want to make sure the people we bring in get a quality experience more than anything.”*

Javid, HR Staff Member, Case Study A.

Data shows that the organisation was previously dismissive of apprenticeships and unwilling to engage, until funding implications inspired a change of strategy. This is significant as this is a dynamic that is not accounted for within Bredgaard’s (2017) typology. It is evidently the case that employer behaviour may change, thus the position of some within the framework may move over time. This will need to be seriously evaluated to ensure the framework provides maximum utility. Interview data however makes it clear, despite the seeming error of one manager, that the

organisation engages with apprenticeships.

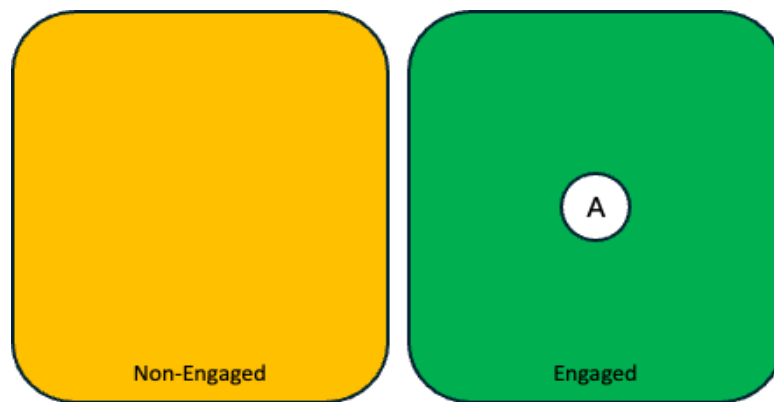


Figure 4. Employer A - Engaged.

It was also found that Employer B and Employer E engage with apprenticeships. Interview participants within Employer B could not specify an exact number of current apprentices, but multiple staff members acknowledged that apprentices are currently being trained, whilst acknowledging that there are not many on the books currently. Employer E hires two new apprentices every few years. An interview with a senior staff member of Employer B was particularly helpful for understanding its position, as he explained that the organisation believed itself to be restricted with regards to the number of apprentices it could bring in because of concerns around cost, which he believed to be exacerbated by the Apprenticeship Levy.

*“I know we sometimes have guys who want to bring more bodies in, that maybe helps give them an easier life, someone else in the van to help out, but of course there’s a financial aspect . . . the cost when you consider the training, salary, now we are paying this levy that is barely any use . . . I would say I err on the side of caution numbers wise.”*

Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.

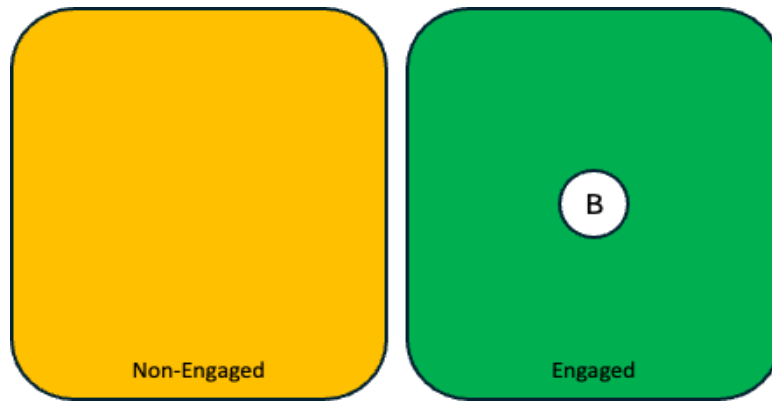


Figure 5. Employer B - Engaged.

For Employer E, interviews again note that engagement is limited, and the recurring theme brought up by staff members relates to the lack of available work, as excess labour costs had recently caused the company to shut down a site, and the lack of physical space for apprentices, as being the most significant challenges to expanding engagement further. This is perceived as a barrier to engagement beyond current levels.

*“We shut down (one of the sites), there’s issues of what work is available, who is being kept on. Another problem is where you put them . . . we will keep to the two that we stream in at the rate we do.”*

Kieran, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

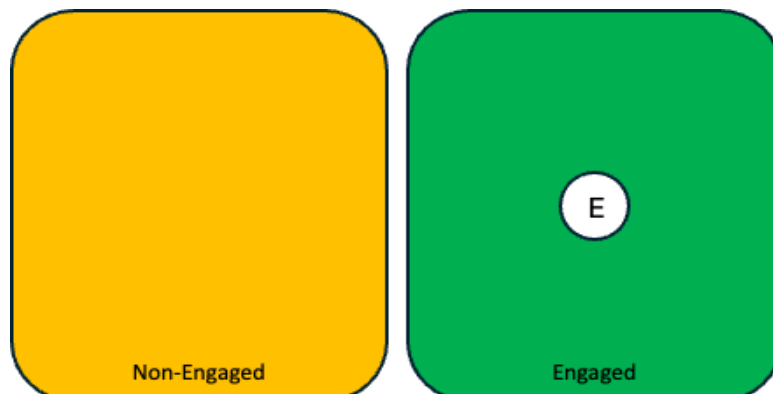


Figure 6. Employer E - Engaged.

Interviews conducted within Employers C depict a long-standing consistent apprenticeship programme with numbers remaining broadly the same for a period of years, appropriate to the size of the company. Documentary analysis also supported this claim, with evidence found on both the company website and a third-party skills website, demonstrating the company's long-standing engagement.

*“Currently we have 15 employed across two companies, the construction and the surfacing. So 15 based from Edinburgh to Glasgow, which is pretty standard.”*

Reo, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.

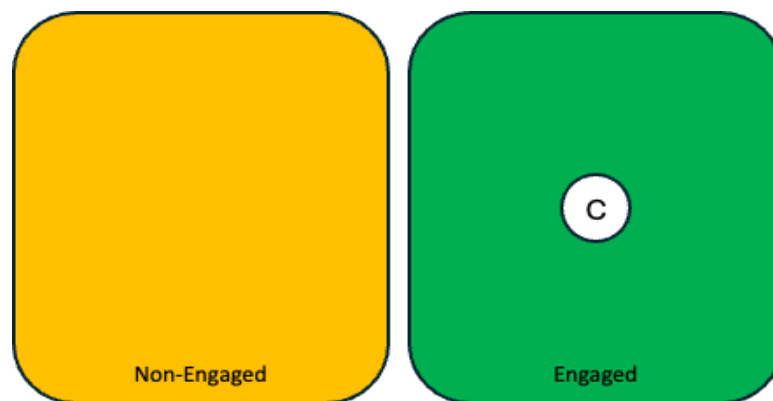


Figure 7. Employer E - Engaged.

A similarly clear depiction is provided with relation to Case Study F. One interview explicitly explained how many apprentices are hired annually, why this is the case, and then highlighted the practical obstacles that the organisation believes prevent it from increasing engagement beyond current levels. This too was supported with documentary evidence.

*“Usually we bring in about 6-8 a year, depending a bit on outgoings . . . but we know we can't flood the shop floor with apprentices.”*

Denula, HR Staff Member, Case Study F.

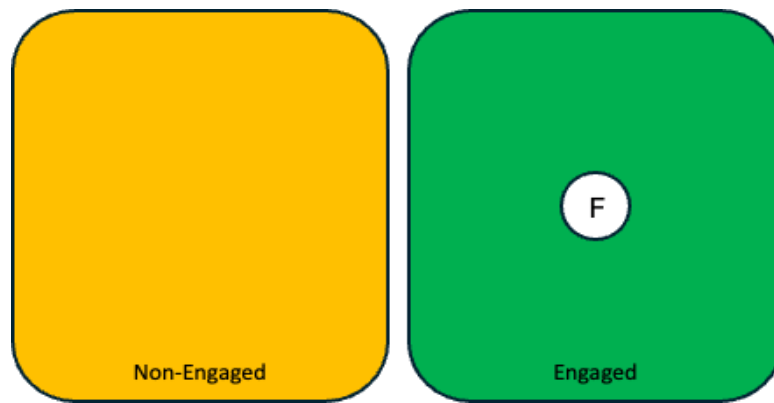


Figure 8. Employer F - Engaged.

Employer G is a significant recruiter of apprentices in Scotland. The company also trains and hires apprentices in other parts of the UK. Several interviews reiterate that apprenticeship engagement has been an embedded element of organisational strategy. This company also has played an active role in apprenticeships, with various YouTube videos posted on company social media pages proclaiming the benefits of apprenticeships.

*“We pride ourselves in it. We put the word out there, this is a good place to come and do your apprenticeship. There is opportunity there if you want to grab it.”*

Daly, HR Staff, Case Study.

There is also data that addresses practical obstacles that limits engagement in some circumstances, but it is clear the organisation engages to the extent that it sees fit.

*“That’s where sometimes we then bring the numbers back slightly to say, yes, we could take 20 in that business unit, but if we take 20, we can’t look after them, we can’t support them, we can’t give them a good experience. Maybe we shouldn’t take them, let’s take 10, or whatever it might be. That’s the kind of discussion we’ll have.”*

Siobhan, Management Level, Case Study G.

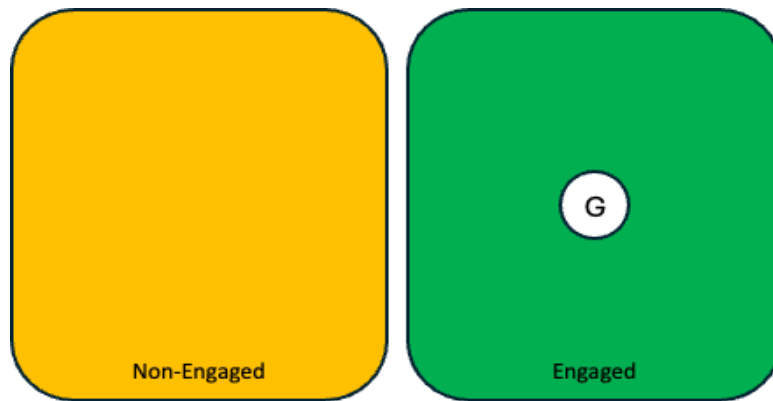


Figure 9. Employer G - Engaged.

Employer J provides a strong retail apprenticeship programme. Interviews were conducted with HR staff and a current apprentice in this instance. Additionally, several job advertisements were found online and included within the documentary analysis, demonstrating clearly that the company continues to hire and train people in apprenticeship roles. There are again practical limitations that prevent engagement stretching much beyond the current level, but the approach taken is clearly outlined.

*“We bring in a decent amount I think, if you look at where we are placing people, but there only so many stores . . . so there’s a balance to be had.”*

Kevin, Management Level, Case Study J.

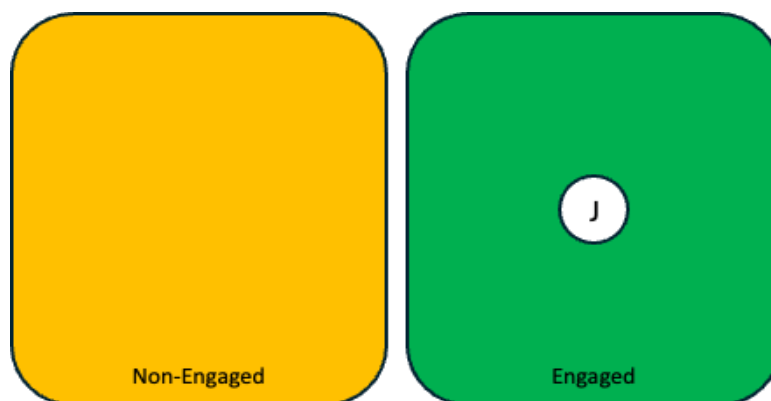


Figure 10. Employer J - Engaged.

Employer I offers multiple different apprenticeship programmes, taking on a significant number of apprentices into each cohort, per year. The apprenticeship programmes have strong buy in from management and the trade unions, who helped to lobby for the apprenticeship schemes and played an active role in designing them. These apprenticeship schemes have been very well advertised and heralded in newspapers, on skills websites, and are showcased in a variety of videos on social media to promote the concept of apprenticeships broadly and to appeal to potential applicants.

*“Every time we have hired in batches of 10, the numbers applying are massive, huge. So we know it’s working, but I come back to what I’ve said, it’s all well and good them working away, but what do you do when their shift finishes? It’s the beds, the living space, when they get off shift that prohibits it a wee bit.”*

Stuart, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.

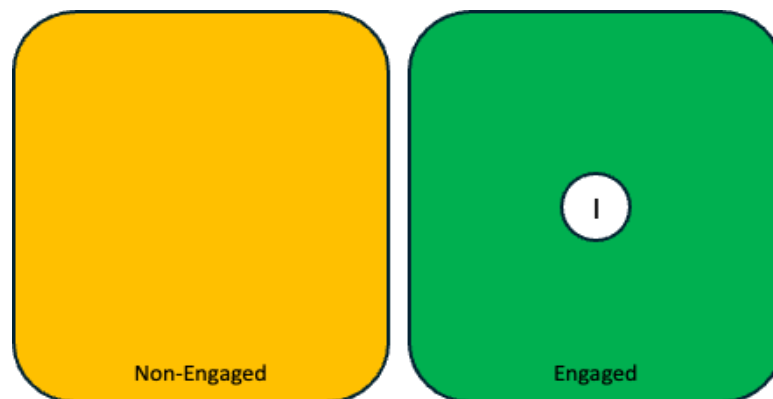


Figure 11. Employer I - Engaged.

Employer D is shown to engage with apprenticeships and does so at a particularly high rate. A common theme within interview data for this case study is that staff members within the HR department understand that the recruitment and training strategy being undertaken is majorly reliant on apprenticeships, but that the



company almost seems to be attempting to make up for lost time as it had refused to engage with apprenticeships for a prolonged period. This is because the organisation had previously dismissed the prospect of apprenticeship engagement outright.

*“We are sort of bringing through loads at the minute. And I mean, I say at the minute, but that will probably continue . . . we know we need to replace outgoing staff, that won’t change, but look, this is working. It gets us the skills, we can get people used to our ways of working, so it is a case of the more the merrier.”*

Hayley, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

*“Because we didn’t do it for years, there was maybe a void created in terms of skills, but with what we are doing now, we are seeing the benefit. So I don’t know why we wouldn’t keep pushing people through, this isn’t a short term fix, it’s about the pipeline, we need to keep feeding it.”*

Megan, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

Case Study D, similarly to Case Study A, demonstrates that employer behaviour can and does change. Engagement levels are not set irreversibly in stone, as non-engaged employees can decide to begin engaging, whilst engaged employees can decide to stop. This however is not properly accounted for within Bredgaard’s (2017) framework; thus, consideration will be given to how this can be developed to improve the utility of the typology.

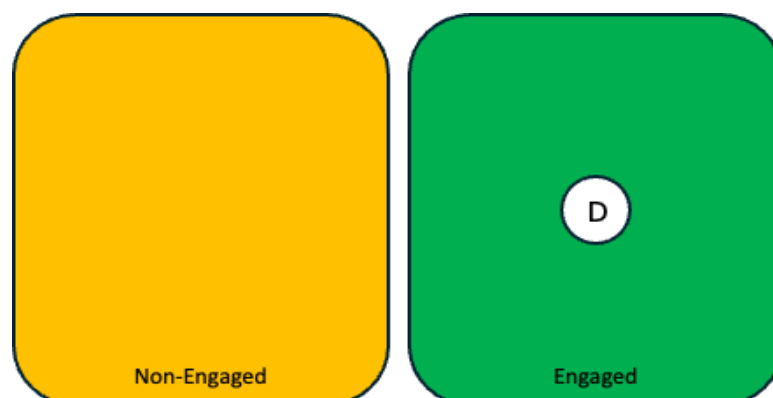


Figure 12. Employer D - Engaged.

### Non-Engaged Employers

Employer H does not engage with apprenticeships, and this came through clearly within the interviews conducted. This organisation does not hire apprentices directly, as it pursues a strategy that emphasises flexibility for the employer, opting to use third party agencies and subcontractors rather than hire a vast amount of full-time contracted staff. Analysis of organisational documents, including the company website, included no mention of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland.

*“We employ labour through labour agencies. If we require anything further like joiners, scaffolders, lift supervisors, you deal with subcontractors. (Case Study H company name) will not employ, unfortunately, see weekly wage staff, well not that they won’t, they’ve looked at it, it’s not a viable option.”*

Greg, Management Level, Case Study H.

Despite taking this hard-line approach, another interview served to indicate that whilst the company is generally opposed to the notion of apprenticeship engagement, the door is not completely closed on the prospect.

*“It’s all about money, that’s what drives this. There’s less risk using subbies (subcontractors) but see if tomorrow there was a tender bid for a project that (the company) won that says you need to hire apprentices direct, they’d do it. They’d have to, not as if they’re short the dough . . . you probably couldn’t rule that out. I’m sure they’d just get on with it rather than bother fighting it.”*

Brendan, Worker, Case Study H.

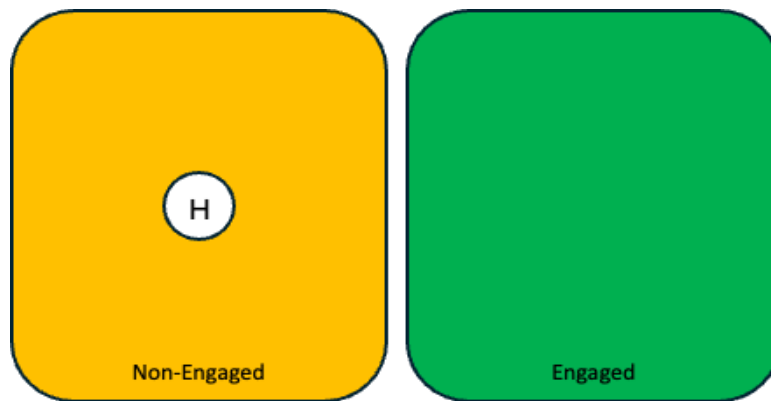


Figure 13. Employer H - Non-Engaged.

The only organisation that was strongly committed to the strategy of non-engagement with apprenticeships is Employer K. This is an interesting example. Employer K is a non-profit organisation, founded initially as a charity, with a strong social ethos that interview data demonstrate strongly drives organisational decision making, including in relation to recruitment, skills, and development. The organisation also offers a service to help vulnerable young people find employment, which often means actively attempting to place people into apprenticeship roles. Despite this, interview data repeatedly demonstrate that the refusal to engage with apprenticeships was based on principle, as the recruitment that the organisation undertakes does not require apprenticeships, and it is broadly felt that to turn existing jobs into apprenticeships would diminish their status, pay and conditions, in a way that would be inconsistent with the values of the organisation.

*“We did discuss it, you know you could do it, probably quite easily. We could bring in some apprentices, you can save a bit of cash, have them doing qualifications for a year or whatever while they work. There’s probably people out there who do this kind of thing, but it’s just not us. It’s not what we are about.”*

Niamh, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

*“It’s the principle. We wouldn’t make a decision that sort of flew in the face of what has been built. Deciding to turn a good job, that’s quite well paid, good*

*training, rewarding, you build up these positive relationships, into like a drawn-out qualification, so we could maybe save some cash, no. It's not something I think we'd entertain."*

Joseph, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

The strength of feeling on this was equally strong across all five interviews conducted with staff members, and it is this commonly understood ethos that was believed to be the driving force of the organisation's success, therefore without a significant change to the current perspective, the strategy will almost certainly remain to not engage with apprenticeships. Six months after the interviews for this case study was completed, a search was undertaken on the official website for available job roles. There were one hundred jobs advertised with the organisation at that point, yet none were apprenticeships.

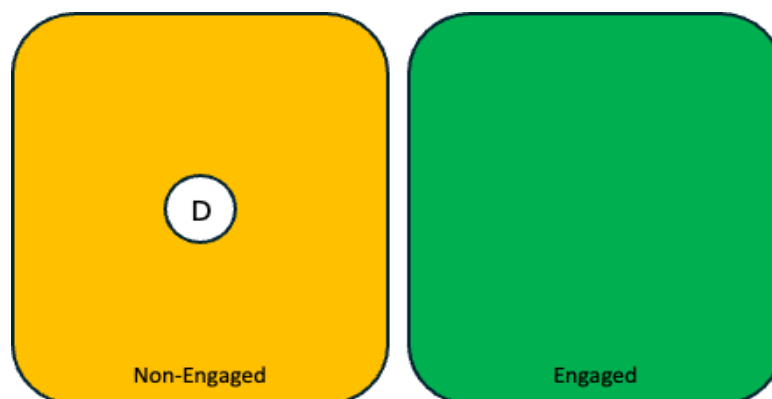


Figure 14. Employer D - Non-Engaged.

### Attitude: Positive or Negative?

The second question that is crucial to categorising employers within Bredgaard's typology relates to attitude. Identifying an organisational attitude presents a significant challenge, not least because there is a debate to be had as to whether such a thing truly exists. Individuals within an organisation are likely to have a

range of beliefs and attitudes about different things, but that does not necessarily mean such perspectives represent the organisation at large. It was deemed that it would be likely for there to be conflicting attitudes to apprenticeships within organisations, and that there would also be the potential for conflicting evidence even at an individual level when assessing each interview participant's perspective. A clear strategy was therefore laid out for the evaluation of individual interview data, and for the categorisation of case study organisations, to ensure consistency of approach.

The first challenge lay in analysing data within individual interviews and evaluating them as representing either a positive or negative attitude. Attitudes regarding apprenticeships were often layered with different perspectives on related issues such as apprentices, young workers, apprenticeship frameworks, the Apprenticeship Levy, and perceptions of the role of SDS. It is the case that some participants have claimed within interviews to hold a positive attitude towards apprenticeships but framed any positive discussion around apprenticeships as a concept, rather than about how they operate in practice. Often these participants proclaimed to support apprenticeships but then spoke at length about major dissatisfactions and frustrations over frameworks, finances, bureaucracy, and the quality of apprentices themselves. In many of these instances, the participants appeared to hold a positive view of an idealised vision of what an apprenticeship is, or simply wished to convey this impression, whilst holding and expressing negative views of apprenticeships as they operate within their own context. The critical realist foundation of this work provided scope to dig beneath the surface to draw conclusions and make inferences based on available evidence. In these instances, greater weight was given to the attitude of participants to apprenticeships in practice, rather than in theory. That is not to say that every criticism of any aspect of apprenticeships was understood as revealing a negative attitude, but when participants were overwhelmingly negative in their appraisal of apprenticeships but claimed to still be positive about them in theory, the decision was taken to classify their attitude as negative.

The next significant challenge then lay in evaluating the attitude of each

organisation. Given that attitudes will differ to some extent among individuals within an organisation, the decision was taken to not seek a binding organisational attitude that all staff members adhere to, but rather the identification of the *prevailing attitude* within the organisation towards apprenticeships. Conclusions were reached about the prevailing attitude of an organisation in one of two ways. Firstly, if there was a clear consensus across interviews that demonstrates that there is a commonly held attitude amongst all or most employees regarding apprenticeships, then this was deemed the prevailing attitude. If, however, there was some contradiction that prevented a common consensus being identified across the organisation, efforts were made to analyse data to identify the prevailing attitude among those most responsible for organisational decision making in relation to apprenticeship engagement. Additionally, documentary data was analysed to corroborate findings gleaned from interview data to ensure the correct classification had been reached. This strategy produced solid, evidence-based findings, and allowed employers to be categorised confidently in every instance. This overall approach ensured that attitudes have been measured consistently, and that the findings reflect the decision-making process within these organisations.

### Positive Attitude

With clear boundaries set, the challenge of categorising employers based upon prevailing attitudes towards apprenticeships was made more straightforward. In analysing gathered data, it quickly became clear that a strongly positive prevailing attitude towards apprenticeship was apparent within Employer I and Employer K. Positive attitudes across all interviews conducted within these case studies demonstrated a strong consensus. A key recurring theme found within data relates to the depth of feeling expressed by interview participants in their evident enthusiasm and passion for apprenticeships, as well as the extent to which such views were expressed in unison across these organisations. Documentary analysis also supported this conclusion in both instances. For Employer I, four online newspaper articles were found about the organisation's apprenticeship

programme, supported with quotes from apprentices, staff and outside stakeholders, that emphasised the positivity held within the organisation about apprenticeships. For Employer K, a report was found on the organisation website showing how it supports external apprenticeships, with evidence that corroborates the positive attitudes expressed.

*“We are really big on apprenticeships, they can be such a great tool for people who need a kind of foot in the door to skilled work, particularly those that are vulnerable, and young people who are maybe just figuring it all out . . . it is something our team has a real passion for.”*

Niamh, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

*“I’m all in favour, apprenticeships can be such a good path for people to take. Young people leaving school, they get the learning, they get the work experience, it sort of just sets them up properly . . . yeah we’ve some experience with older, I don’t know if you’d call them mature learners or whatever, but people who’ve been in work, but wanted to develop a skill or whatever it is, because they know it will pay off for them when they have it. It’s great.”*

Maria, Management Level, Case Study K.

*“It took us some time to come around, the union guys will tell you that, but it’s all worked so well for us, to the point we really go out there and champion apprenticeships now . . . There are so many positives. You always want to be evolving and improving things, but it’s worked so well, it’s probably become a bit of a personal project almost for some, and we are totally committed to keeping at it, doing our bit, trying to get more people to see how this can all work.”*

Stuart, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.

*“Right behind them (apprenticeships), absolutely. I think they’re great for young people, and I doubt you’d find a single person in here who’d say otherwise . . .*

*it's all going great guns, all working the way some of us hoped."*

Alistair, Worker and Union Rep, Case Study I.

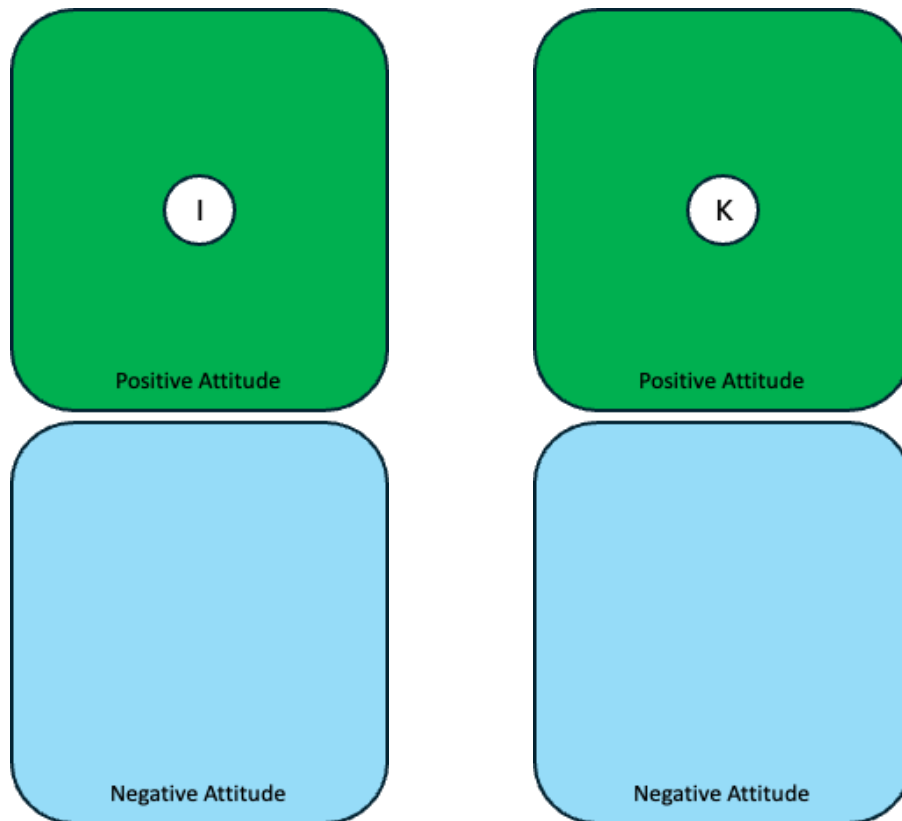


Figure 15. Employers I and K - Positive.

Analysis of Employer D, Employer F and Employer J demonstrates that the prevailing attitude towards apprenticeships within these organisations is moderately positive. Similarly, to the highly positive employers, data gathered for Employers D, F and J present a strong level of consensus with a commonly held positive view of apprenticeships, however with slightly less enthusiasm for apprenticeships in theory and a slight increase in criticism of apprenticeships in practice. Even though these three employers operate in entirely different industries, and thus hire for different types of jobs, there are some interesting similarities, including similar language used by interviewees when discussing attitudes to apprenticeships.



*“We are definitely pro-apprenticeship, we’ve a bit of history with them that’s for sure. Our experiences have mostly been good but even if we had a few bad ones, nothing would change, we’d still be supportive . . . our attitude wouldn’t change.”*

Elliott, HR Staff Member, Case Study F.

*“I’m a fan of apprenticeships. Big fan actually. I done one myself as a boy and there’s no doubt it served me well.”*

Jimmy, Management Level, Case Study F.

*“It’s obviously been working for us, so I mean we are in favour of apprenticeships, I’d say supportive of them.”*

Umar, HR Staff Member, Case Study J.

*“I’ve really enjoyed it . . . it’s sometimes a lot of work, but [management] try to help. People always seem interested, apprenticeships are becoming a kind of big thing in here, I know it gets talked about at [headquarters location]. They just seem dead keen to make it work, they’ll ask how I’m getting on and that . . . it’s all really positive.”*

Chris, Apprentice, Case Study J.

*“I think the best way to describe it is as a journey. We were very negative, we weren’t interested in doing it, we’d been burnt before and that was that. But that has all changed, we’ve become very pro-apprenticeship, and I didn’t think I’d have been saying that a few years ago . . . and what’s more, even those who were hesitant are buying in, bit by bit, they’re becoming more supportive.”*

Hayley, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

*“I love apprenticeships, but I don’t think anyone else agreed with me at first . . . people are so much more positive now, the turnaround has been massive. I almost can’t believe it compared to where we were.”*

Kristi, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

Positive language around apprenticeships is commonly found within the interview data across these three case studies and additional documentary and secondary analysis corroborates these findings. Four newspaper articles, and an ‘Economic Impact Assessment’ report that evaluated supply chains for a UK council discussed contracts awarded to Employer F. Within each of these, mention is made by the company, or by a representative on its behalf, of its continued commitment to and enthusiasm for apprenticeships. Another newspaper article was found that focused on apprenticeship week, which included the following quote from a senior figure within Employer F:

*“Apprentices are key to the success of this generation”.*

For Employer J, the company website proclaims that a key ‘pillar’ of the organisation is its commitment to fostering diverse talent. An attached video makes it clear that apprenticeships are central to that aim and communicates an enthusiasm for the approach being taken. For Employer D, some internal documentation was provided that demonstrated that positive attitudes regarding apprenticeships are commonly held across the human resource department and among mid-level management staff. Across Case Studies D, F and J, documentary evidence helped to corroborate the prevailing positive attitudes around apprenticeships identified within interview data.

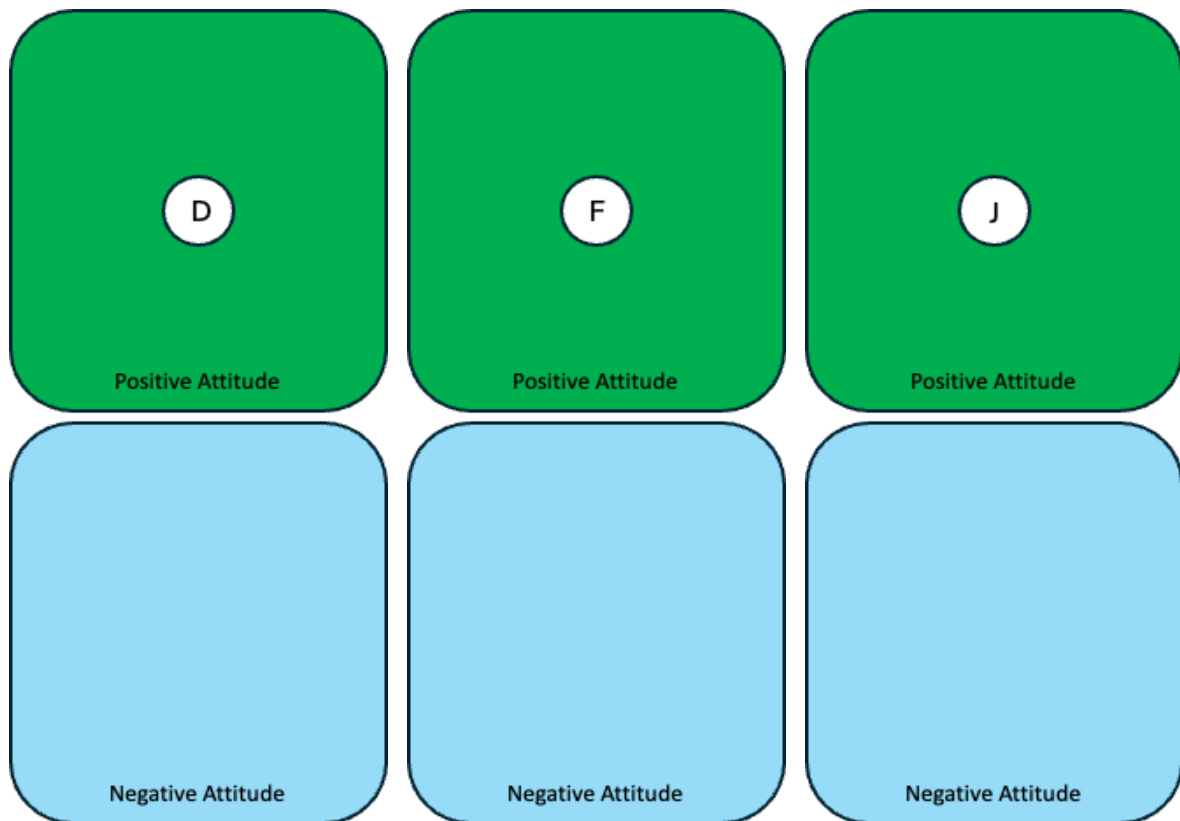


Figure 16. Employers D, F and J - Positive.

It is important to acknowledge though that there were criticisms of apprenticeships within data gathered for these three organisations. These views however were not common and explicitly related to an aspect, or aspects, of apprenticeships, and they did not reflect the attitude of the individual participant, or the organisation. It is also important to note that interview participants within Case Study D are very clear that the organisation had a negative prevailing attitude about apprenticeships only a few years ago. This was largely shaped by the negative experience of some poor apprentice hires. In recent years however the company has seen a significant change, going from non-engaged to engaged, and seeing a considerable shift in attitude. This demonstrates that just like engagement levels, employer attitudes can change too. The typology does not capture this dynamic, thus further evaluation will be required on the issue of changing employer perspectives and behaviour to improve the utility of the framework.

In terms of framework placement, Employer B and Employer G presented a greater challenge than the other positive attitude employers in evaluating the prevailing attitude within each case study. This is because there was greater ambiguity and contradiction within data in these instances, however the analytical approach taken still allowed them to be categorised confidently within the framework. In each instance, the prevailing attitude towards apprenticeships was broadly positive. Employer B is a particularly interesting example here, as an interview with a senior figure began with effusive praise of apprenticeships. The early stages of this interview contained some personal anecdotes about why the participant appreciates apprenticeships.

*“We are very big on apprenticeships, with my background, it’s important to me”.*

*“It’s the whole picture of what an apprenticeship gives someone. The experience they get from it. You know, they’ll learn the basics, they’ll do their homework on the theory, you’d hope I guess that they pass, get the certificates (qualifications) and aye, great. But you need the experience . . . you can’t get that stuck in a classroom. It’s working with people, getting used to showing up time, are you reliable? Can you be counted on? Apprenticeships are so great for that grounding.”*

Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.

However as the interview moved on, Peter became critical of the operation of apprenticeships in Scotland. He spoke at length about perceived failings in how the Scottish Government and SDS manages apprenticeships, and claimed that employers like him, with vast experience of managing apprenticeship schemes, should have more say over policy, and should receive more practical support.

*“What I can say is I have had absolutely no help from anybody at the Scottish Government, in actual fact they have been horrendous . . . Then with the levy, it has been horrendous. And nobody is prepared to take ownership of it.”*

Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.

Peter has a huge amount of influence over recruitment strategy within the company, which makes this interview particularly significant. It is apparent though within data that his primary contention is that apprenticeships are a positive thing, but that they could be run better. Whilst his quotes at points potentially suggest he holds onto a slightly idealised vision of apprenticeships, these quotes also relate directly to practical, tangible elements of apprenticeship programmes and to clear outcomes. It is clear then that he holds a positive view of apprenticeships, in theory and in practice, despite his reservations over the Scottish Government's role in managing current frameworks. An online article written for a large Scottish newspaper by a senior figure within Case Study B reiterates the points made by Peter, in that the article is very much supportive of apprenticeships, but critical of the Apprenticeship Levy. Interviews with other staff members also help to corroborate the finding that the prevailing attitude within the company regarding apprenticeships is positive.

*“Yeah, I’m in favour of apprenticeships. Developing staff, the skills, it’s good surely.”*

Hannes, HR Staff Member, Case Study B.

Employer G is another interesting and challenging case study for evaluating prevailing attitude as there are some contradictions found within collected data. Employer G is a private company that operates across the UK, having to navigate different apprenticeship systems and different approaches to the Apprenticeship Levy. It is evident from interview data that frustrations around this, and the perception that the levy is fairer and easier to deal with in England, creates some resentment within the organisation. This comes up in several interviews.

*“I think the frustration is mainly about fairness, and ok it’s maybe a bit annoying managing all these different systems and the paperwork. But in England we pay the levy, we get that back more or less, we use that for training. Easy. In*

*Scotland, it's not so easy."*

Magdalena, Management Level, Case Study G.

Magdalena was then asked if this impacts the attitude towards apprenticeships within the company, and answered as follows:

*"Yes and no. It's annoying, it's more work, I do think it's unfair. But we still recruit apprentices, the training with it, we need them. They are good for us, we're growing and building, it ties in. There is a benefit, it just isn't as smooth sailing as we'd like at times. "*

This focus on practical benefits, specifically around skill development and organisational growth was echoed by other Siobhan, another management level employee.

*"I'd say yeah, they work quite well. For us it's about expanding skills, trying to hit our growth targets, and they've been useful in that regard."*

Siobhan, Management Level, Case Study G.

The language here is not overly enthusiastic, but the prevailing attitude is positive as it is recognised that the pros of apprenticeships for the organisation outweigh the cons. The organisation is also an active participant in apprenticeship events and initiatives. Documentary analysis was conducted, drawing from an online case study, a newspaper report, and a video available on YouTube, all of which included evidence of staff members speaking positively about apprenticeships. The following quote serves as an example:

*"It is also clear that recruiting apprentices is great for business and we continue our drive to create a pipeline of experienced . . . professionals to support our growing industry."*

## Senior Employee, Case Study G.

Through thorough analysis of all available data, Employer G can be confidently categorised as having a positive prevailing attitude about apprenticeships even though some management staff have expressed dismay at the management of apprenticeships in Scotland.



Figure 17. Employers B and G - Positive.

### *Negative Attitudes*

There were four case study organisations classified as displaying a negative prevailing attitude towards apprenticeships. When analysing available data, it became quickly apparent that Employer A and Employer H very clearly demonstrated a negative prevailing attitude. The categorisation process for these

two organisations was therefore straightforward. Employer A is very a simple case in this regard and the consensus among the organisation regarding apprenticeships is solidly negative.

*“It’s just not something we are into, it feels like there’s always hassle with it.”*

Ross, Management Level, Case Study A.

*“It’s probably the outside interference thing that puts people off. You want to have full oversight.”*

Javid, HR Staff Member, Case Study A.

The company engages with apprenticeships, but primarily because of financial incentives and to make use of available funding. Company staff are very open in acknowledging that they would rather not run their training programme as an apprenticeship.

*“We wouldn’t have it as an apprenticeship if we had our way. It was purely a practical decision, we’ve made the adjustments now . . . the programme has been a success I would say, but not because of the word apprenticeship being thrown in there. That makes no difference.”*

Bruno, Management Level, Case Study A.

This is corroborated in the documentary analysis as job advertisements were found for the recruitment of the types of position discussed across these interviews, however none were advertised as apprenticeship positions, even though that is ostensibly what they are. They are instead listed as traineeships, which implicitly corroborates the broad points made in the discussions with staff members. There is no public note to be found of apprenticeships on the company website and it has played no active part in promoting apprenticeships in the public domain.



Unlike Employer A, Employer H does not engage with apprenticeships at all, though data gathered for this case study present equal consistency in its pessimistic and negative prevailing view of apprenticeships. The company tends to rely on agency workers and subcontractors, prioritising employer flexibility. Apprenticeships are therefore framed as problematic because of the contractual commitment, as well as the time, money, and energy that apprenticeships require. Apprentices do work on sites managed by the company, but not for the company directly, and there is no appetite within the organisation for that to change.

*“No, there’s no clamour to change the way we work or anything. We don’t hire apprentices directly, that won’t change . . . I guess it is about wanting flexibility, about not wanting hassle, about not wanting tied up in all this. The company isn’t interested, and it doesn’t need to.”*

Daniel, Management Level, Case Study H.

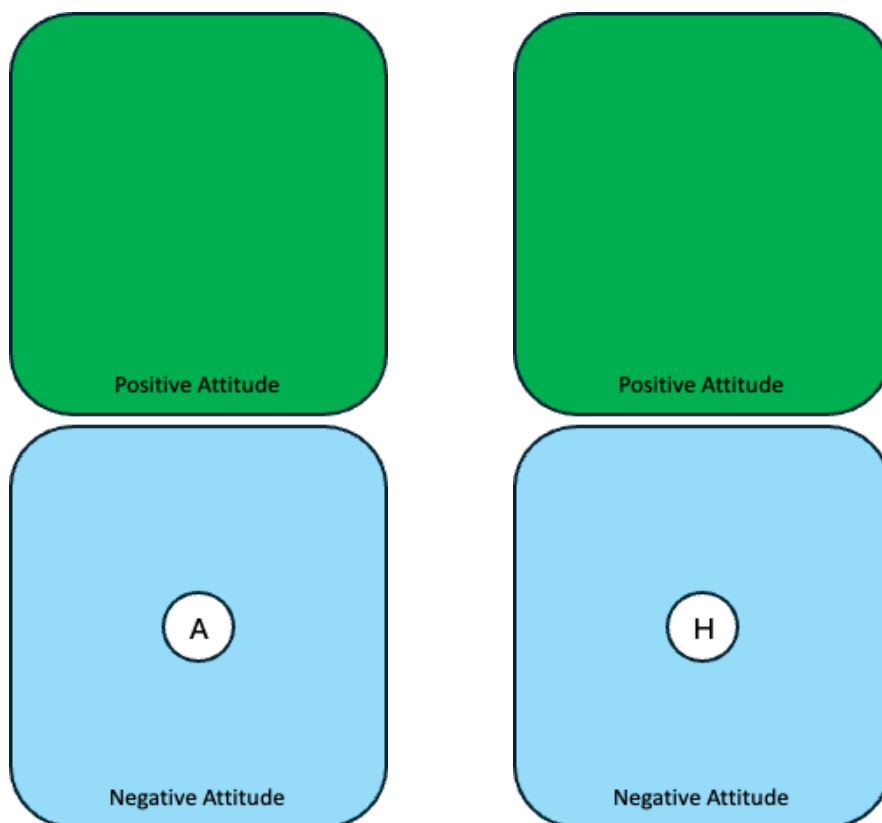


Figure 18. Employers A and H - Negative.

Accurately categorising Employer C and Employer E proved more challenging, however following careful analysis, it was deemed that negative attitudes prevail within these organisations. There is evidence in both instances of staff members expressing positive attitudes about apprenticeships in theory, however this is outweighed significantly by sharp critiques of the practical reality of apprenticeships, particularly by staff members with significant influence over decision-making for recruitment and training.

*“I think they’re great, I really do . . . the problem is I’m a bit on my own in that for the moment.”*

Carl, Management Level, Case Study C.

*“I am for apprenticeships, they worked well at the place I worked before [company name]. But it’s the stuff that comes with it that sometimes makes it feel like the juice isn’t worth the squeeze.”*

Claire, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.

Within Case Study C, we find several positive quotes, and there are themes within data that suggest an upbeat perspective on apprenticeships. Upon digging deeper though, this does not hold up to scrutiny. Carl expresses a positive attitude about apprenticeships, but by his own admission, his remit largely sits outside the realm of training and recruitment, and whilst he has some scope to influence discussions, he confesses that it is not a position he pushes strongly. Claire, who has a driving influence on training and recruitment in her role, purports to hold a positive attitude regarding apprenticeships, but the way in which she frames this positivity is around an abstract concept of apprenticeship. When she discusses the actual practicalities of apprenticeships, she is critical and negative on a broad range of related issues.

*“I think a lot could be done better. I’ve spoke your ear off a bit about the funding stuff, but I just think more could be done to work with employers. I think more input into the learning side, more help financially . . . We use apprenticeships, I think we sort of have to. I can’t see that changing, but there are some things that need to improve.”*

Claire, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.

Whilst there was no documentary evidence for this case study that really touched on apprenticeship attitude, it is worth noting that there is no record online of the company taking part in any promotion of apprenticeships. The themes drawn from the interview with Claire are also supported in other interviews within the case study among staff with greater input into the recruitment decision making process than Carl.

*“I’ve been an advocate in the past, but like, let’s be real here, I mean some of the experiences we’ve had the last couple years, aye, I’ll be honest, it’s maybe made me a bit more agnostic about it all . . . we’ll use them (apprenticeships) to our advantage and that but we definitely would prefer a smoother process.”*

Cameron, Management Level, Case Study C.

*“On speaking to some of the boys, it’s as if some of them just don’t fancy working in construction. Some of them don’t like working in the inclement weather that we get here in Scotland. Some of them just stumble into it . . . and these guys aren’t suitable. It is a frustration.”*

Reo, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.

Within Case Study E, a similar pattern is developed in the sense. Staff are often keen to suggest that they hold a positive attitude about apprenticeships, but this is framed very explicitly in the abstract, rather than relating to how apprenticeships are experienced. The perception of the reality of apprenticeships is generally

negative across the interviews conducted.

*“The idea of apprenticeships is great. And I’ve made the point that for your longer-term planning, the decision was made a long time ago in here, apprenticeships is what we do. But in real-time it feels like it does bring some amount of headaches for us.”*

Thomas, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

*“They’re brilliant when it’s all working well, but I know there’s been some problems, some people aren’t convinced by the financial aspect in our current situation . . . if you step back a bit, (these issues) have probably influenced how people think in here.”*

Kieran, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

The decision was made to categorise the prevailing attitude here as negative because there is a negative consensus among interviewed staff about apprenticeships in practice. Additionally, it is this perception of the practice of apprenticeships that seems to have had an impact on organisational decision making in relation to the company’s level of apprenticeship engagement. Employer E has halved its level of engagement in recent years, citing issues around available work, but interview participants have explicitly linked this change to the cost of apprenticeships and a deep sense of frustration felt over the perceived overbearing bureaucracy attached.

*“I think we had to cut it, some of that was maybe forced on the team, but with all that is attached to apprenticeships now, I don’t know, maybe people were a bit more willing to see numbers cut there than they might have been in the past.”*

Shannan, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

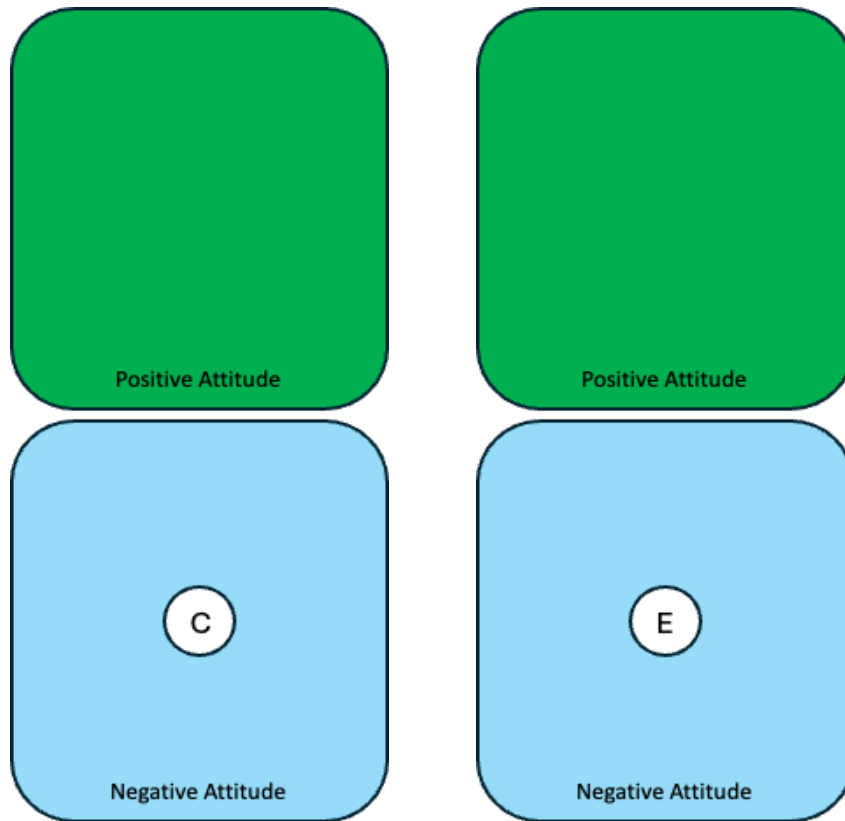


Figure 19. Employers C and E - Negative.

### Full Typology Placement

The process of analysing the gathered case study data, searching for and identifying themes, and then evaluating each employer based on engagement and prevailing attitude towards apprenticeships, has allowed each individual organisation to be placed accurately within Bredgaard’s typology. This is done by taking the classification dependent on engagement and prevailing attitude towards apprenticeships. The full placement of these organisations is shown below:

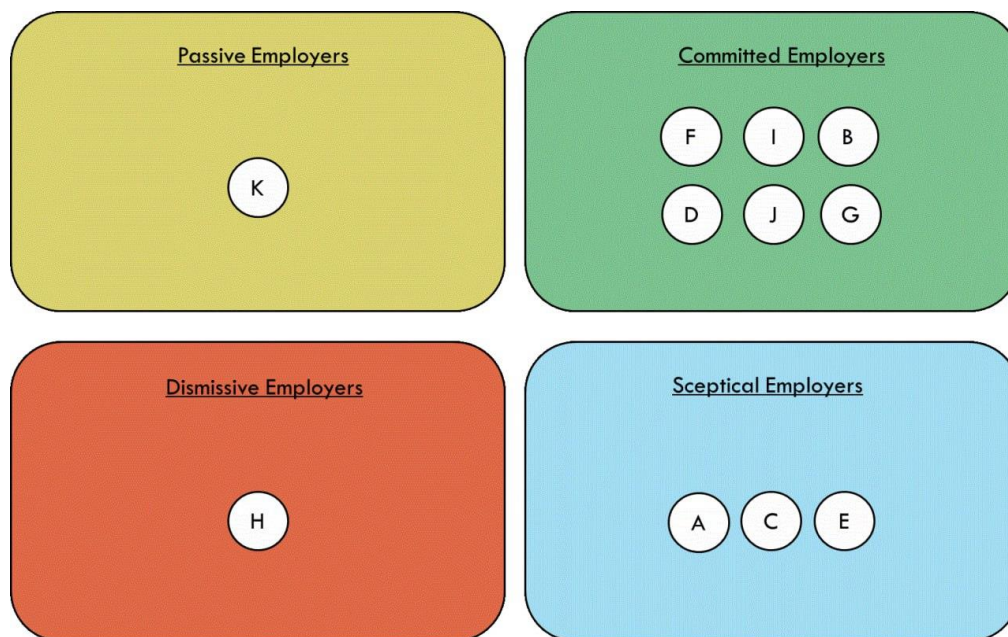


Figure 20. Full Typology Placement.

Each organisation has been placed successfully within the framework and categorised as either a committed employer, a sceptical employer, a passive employer, or a dismissive employer. Most employers fall into the committed category, with six case studies meeting the criteria. There have been three sceptical employers identified, with only a single employer each placed in the passive and dismissive categories. One interesting aspect of the placement of organisations within the typology is that it confirms the foundational claims made by Bredgaard (2017) in the creation of the framework, in that some employers may engage with a labour market policy or initiative without necessarily holding a positive view of that policy or initiative. There is also clear evidence that other organisations can hold a broadly positive view of a scheme or initiative, yet not engage with it. The case studies conducted support these assertions, demonstrating that there is not a definitive causal link between the attitude an employer has about apprenticeships and whether they engage with apprenticeships. It is this that truly demonstrates the utility of the framework.

## Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the utility of Bredgaard's framework for increasing understanding of employer engagement with apprenticeships in Scotland by enabling employers to be categorised based on engagement and attitude. Each employer has been successfully placed within the framework, and the placement demonstrates that a key contention of the framework is correct, in that an organisation may hold a negative view of apprenticeships and still engage, whilst another may hold a positive view and not engage. A shortcoming in the framework has also been identified however, as evidence demonstrates that employer behaviour is subject to change, thus if one is to truly develop an in-depth understanding of employer engagement with apprenticeships, it is necessary to adapt the framework to reflect the scope for changing behaviour.

Categorisation however is only one step in developing the knowledge to support policymakers in their quest to increase apprenticeship opportunity in Scotland. Understanding the theoretical concepts and structural forces that drive apprenticeship engagement requires a nuanced and considered approach. It has therefore been deemed necessary to analyse each different employer type separately to understand if each employer type shares a set of characteristics that will further understanding of employer behaviour. Further chapters are therefore divided by employer types to allow for a thorough analysis of each category of employer. Key themes are once again drawn from data of the case studies for each employer type, with this evidence being presented to demonstrate that each employer type has influencing factors and motivations in common. This holistic approach of combining categorisation based on engagement and attitude with developing understanding of what drives employer decision making is precisely why Bredgaard's (2017) typology was selected ahead of other alternatives discussed within the *Literature Review* (Snape, 1998; Van Der Aa & Van Berkel, 2014; Martin, 2004; Nelson, 2013).

The *Discussion Chapter* then provides a critical analysis that seeks to delve beneath the empirical level to reach the actual and real levels, to reveal the

causal mechanisms driving employer behaviour of each employer type. Following this, a proposal is made within a chapter on developing Bredgaard's typology to consider the movement of employers within the framework, a limitation of its current form identified within this chapter. Finally, the *Conclusion Chapter* will summarise the project and open discussion, led by the evidence, on what interventions by practitioners and policymakers may encourage each employer type to increase their engagement and improve their attitude towards apprenticeships.



## Chapter 5. Engaged Employers

### Overview

Of the eleven case studies conducted as part of this research, nine of these organisations are engaged with apprenticeships. Six of these organisations are committed employers, and three are sceptical employers.

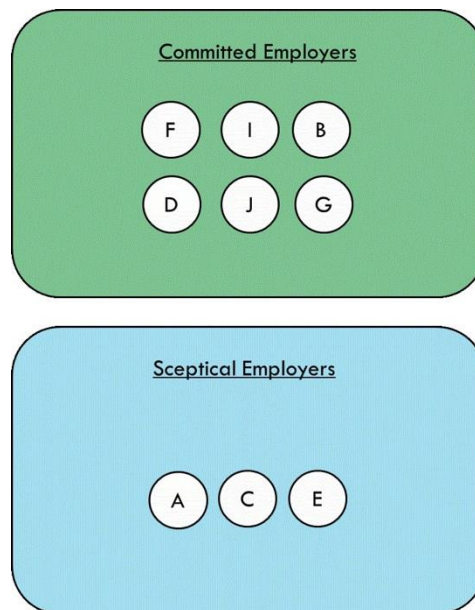


Figure 21. Engaged Employer Placement.

This chapter presents the evidence gathered in relation to these two different types of engaged employer. When analysing data gathered, the thematic list, available as *Appendix A*, was used to direct analysis to locate demi-regularities, meaning thematic patterns within data. There were however some additional themes which were also identified that had not initially been considered or included in the thematic list, but which were evidently significant and have thus been included and critically evaluated. This chapter is structured around the key themes and factors that appear to have the most significant influence on employer engagement with apprenticeships among committed employers and sceptical employers. This chapter therefore focuses on what critical realists understand to be

the empirical level, however the *Discussion Chapter* will provide analysis on what lies beneath the surface of these issues, within the actual level and the real level, thus identifying the structural forces that drive apprenticeship engagement within committed employers.

### Committed Employers

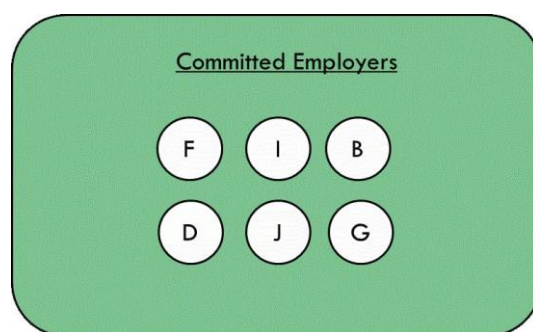


Figure 22. Committed Employer Placement.

### *Overview*

Committed employers are organisations that engage with apprenticeships and have been deemed to demonstrate a prevailing positive attitude regarding them. Despite being one employer type, data gathered demonstrates that committed employers can still be split into two categories: with some committed employers being primarily motivated to engage with apprenticeships over a desire to develop the workforce, and others are primarily motivated because of a desire to use apprenticeships altruistically. This section outlines data gathered in relating to committed employers and sets out what evidence tells us about how these factors impact employer behaviour with relation to apprenticeship engagement.

## *Developing the Workforce*

Every organisation deemed a committed employer expressed, to some degree, an understanding of apprenticeships that relates to a broad commitment to investing in the development of its workforce. This manifests in various ways, with discussions taking place around workforce planning, developing skills, creating a talent pipeline, futureproofing the business, nurturing future leaders and in embedding organisational values in young workers. This was evident within interviews with employees at all levels, and several organisations also noted on their website that apprenticeship are a means by which they ‘invest in people’.

*“We are very much invested in our apprenticeships as a means . . . to building our workforce for the future.”*

Magdalena, Management Level, Case Study G.

*“Where we can afford to take a longer-term perspective on our recruitment, that’s when our preference is going to be apprenticeships. If we don’t desperately need a body . . . right away, we can bring in a young apprentice to train from the ground up, give them the skills that we need them to have . . . that way is much more beneficial for us when we can go down that route.”*

Kieran, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

Not only was this view made evident within the case studies, but it was also acknowledged in interviews with other stakeholders with significant experience of discussing apprenticeships with large employers in Scotland.

*“It goes both ways with employers, some can’t see the woods for the trees but those that can understand it’s in their own interests to invest in skills. They need to build and then rebuild their workforce. Apprenticeship training is a big part of that discussion . . . to get young workers to where the business needs them be.”*

Artur, Skills Practitioner.

For committed employers, investing in the workforce is often central to apprenticeship engagement, though it can manifest in different ways.

*“We do it to train them and keep them. We want the apprentices to be with us long term, whether that is in the same role or progressing up the ladder a bit. That is the whole point, so we build everything with that in mind”.*

Denula, HR Staff Member, Case Study F.

Where internal documentation has been provided within these case studies, it has further supported the assertion that developing the workforce through investment in human capital is a significant driving factor of apprenticeship engagement within committed employers in Scotland. For example, meeting notes on recruitment for one employer’s planned 2023/24 intake notes speakers explicitly arguing to continue recruiting apprentices on this basis. For Case Study F, a piece of academic research was included as part of the documentary analysis, which explicitly suggests that the apprenticeship programme within the company can and should be used to proactively upskill staff to work with the latest technology more effectively. It is evident that for some committed employers the strategy of workforce investment is quite broad, but for others it is more specific, thus it is necessary to evaluate the subthemes identified.

### *Plugging Skills Gaps*

Data demonstrate very clearly that apprenticeships are often used by employers to plug skills gaps, or to begin preparation for gaps that employers fear will appear in the future. An interview conducted with a representative for a British business member organisation helped to summarise the broad conditions that have created considerable challenges for employers in relation to skills in Scotland.

*“I think the number one issue that will come up with our members at the moment though, is how challenging the employment sector market is and the problems people are having with skills. And there's sort of three or four reasons for that. So post-Brexit, the arrival of covid, it is hard to separate between the two, but we know a large number of European workers have left, so we're missing them from the workforce. At the same time . . . we've seen quite a large increase in economic inactivity.*

*That's people between 16 and 65. They're not classed as unemployed, but for whatever reason, are choosing not to work. And there's two main segments in that. So, we're seeing more young people going into higher education than further education . . . and secondly, we're seeing a rise in the 50- to 65-year-olds choosing to come out of the workplace.*

*. . . And we've also got our ageing demographic in Scotland. So, the reality is we've got more people retiring now than we have young people going in. So, that's putting huge pressure on business. Finding talent, keeping talent, you know, retaining talent.”*

Cascia, Business Interests Group Representative.

Cascia succinctly and eloquently depicts the broad contextual factors that have limited the talent pool available to employers in Scotland. The UK's exit from the European Union, the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing numbers of young people remaining in education rather than seeking employment, and the ageing Scottish population have combined to diminish the national labour force that employers can tap into. These factors have largely been discussed within the *Background Chapter*, and here we see them coalescing to significantly impact employer thinking and behaviour.

*“It's getting a bit harder to find the right skills, people with real knowhow . . . there are some older staff [in HR] who moan about this a lot, saying it gets harder every year . . . There are all sorts of reasons for it I guess, but it means we need*

*to really prepare and you know, really work hard at it to find what we want.”*

Shannan, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

It was clear from interviews with HR staff within these committed organisations that there is a growing anxiety around skills, though the level of concern is more pronounced within some organisation than others. The common consensus is that apprenticeships can offer a route out of these difficulties.

*“Finding good workers with the right experience isn’t easy. Even looking for younger staff, a lot of young people want to go off to uni. They don’t want to be out in the cold and the rain or putting in a heavy shift in a factory. The pool we fish in seems to be getting smaller . . . and apprenticeships are probably the main form of bait we use now.”*

Kristi, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

*“It is getting harder [to recruit], for a whole host of reasons. The worry for us though is less about a year from now, but more about 5 or 10 [years] down the line. We can probably get away with cherry picking at the minute, we can go to market and bring in qualifications, experience, what we need. It costs us a bit, but the option is there. My worry is probably we won’t have that option too much longer . . . there’s just too many people leaving this type of work and not enough fresh blood coming in all over.*

*So if we go and bring in apprentices, aye they might not have the skills right away . . . and look some are a bit wet behind the ears, but it’s a far safer bet for us longer term. It hopefully means we won’t be left scrambling when that tipping point really bites and demand for skills way exceeds supply.”*

Jimmy, Management Level, Case Study F.

Here we can follow the thread from the broad structural issues elucidated by

Cascia, through to short term pressures and medium-to-long term threats facing organisations, leading to the decision being taken to engage with apprenticeships. This is an important finding that must be clearly understood. And whilst the structural factors outlined by Cascia are evidently felt at an organisational level and are influencing employer behaviour, we also see some industries where the skills gap is a concern for most, or all, employers in the field. This is hinted at within the discussion with Jimmy, however there are various examples of this kind of thinking. Again though, apprenticeships are often understood as a means through which these gaps can be plugged. Even when there is a feeling that the work available in the industry may not be the most appealing, the overall package offered to young apprentices is such that there is considerable interest in these positions.

*“The skills gap is a big issue for us as seafarers and [for] the maritime industry. Looking for maritime skills and sustaining skills within the industry is vital . . . we want good quality employment, good quality employment opportunities, it’s no an academic job, it’s a physical job . . . but we can offer good pay, good conditions, and we need to get people learning these skills.”*

Alistair, Worker and Trade Union Rep, Case Study I.

Alistair continued, explaining the creation of the apprenticeship programme within the organisation, noting that plans were put in place following discussions over several months between management and the trade union, resulting in an initial ten jobs being advertised.

*“For they first ten apprentices, 6 deck and 4 engine, we got over a thousand applications . . . there was a myth that people didn’t want to work at sea, but that basically blew it out the water.”*

Within this interview, Alistair depicted the working conditions of a physically demanding job, with long and often unsociable hours in what can be a tense and pressured environment at sea. Despite some within the organisation believing that

it would be very difficult to entice new workers into the industry, the offer of a strong apprenticeship programme was evidently able to attract interest. In this instance, the trade unions played a significant role, not just in pushing for and eventually shaping the apprenticeship programme, but also by helping to socialise apprentices into the workforce when they started in their new roles. This helped apprentices settle and be able to contribute meaningfully to the organisation quicker than expected, and interviews suggested that this dynamic helped to ensure that the retention rate of apprentices once they had gained their qualifications was higher than found in other case study organisations.

This collaborative approach helped all stakeholders. The trade union is satisfied that the quality of work, and attached pay and conditions, are protected for their members in the long term. Apprentices enjoy the benefits of this as part of their training whilst also being socialised into the workplace effectively. And the employer can achieve the stated aim of managing the skills gap efficiently through apprenticeship engagement, by developing skilled workers and then retaining them with greater success in the medium to longer term.

Data gathered also demonstrate that the importance of a proactive retention strategy is well understood. It is acknowledged by committed employers that if these organisations are seeking to use apprenticeships as a long-term solution to labour market challenges, this can only work if apprentices are willing to stay with the organisation. These organisations generally also note that if apprentices are to stay long term, they will need to be motivated to do so. These employers therefore tend to proactively work to ensure that apprentices are treated fairly during the period of their apprenticeship, that the working environment is positive, that development opportunities are clearly mapped out, and that workers are relatively well remunerated for the positions they hold. There were also several mentions within gathered data of an increasing focus on building provisions to support workers in achieving a healthy work-life balance. The overall package for apprentices is often shaped with retention in mind, so that when skills are developed, the organisation can benefit.



*“We’d never take on apprentice without having a job for them at the end. I mean, what would be the point? We need to develop skills, to develop expertise, and we need to do everything in our power to keep it. I’m not saying we offer [apprentices] the moon and the stars, but we are more than fair. This is a great place to work, and that isn’t an accident. We want these guys to want to stick with us.”*

Stuart, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.

The evidence demonstrates that committed employers that engage primarily as a form of workforce investment are keen to develop skills to manage labour market shortages. Retention plans are often put in place early for apprentices as part of the broader organisational strategy relating to skills.

### *Talent Pipeline*

Another recurring theme that was found in analysing committed employers is the shared desire to create a ‘talent pipeline’. This was not originally included within the thematic list that was used to help guide data analysis, however Fletcher’s (2016) flexible deductivism allows for the list to be altered and for additional themes to be considered. A talent pipeline used within this context refers to the desire of the employer to bring new people into the organisation, training and developing them as they progress through the organisation, ensuring that the skill and talent of the workforce is continually reproduced. When senior roles, or strategically significant roles, become available within the organisation, if there has been a carefully tended talent pipeline, the hope would often be to then promote from within from the talent pool that has been nurtured and developed internally, and as these figures move into new roles, new hires are brought in at the start of the process and the cycle ideally would repeat.

This scenario was explained as the ideal portrayal of how committed employers would like to see their recruitment and development strategies play out. An

interviewee as part of Case Study E noted that he had only started working at the company relatively recently, and that the job was a newly created post designed in part to help the organisation take a much more strategic approach to succession planning.

*“When they looked at talent and succession planning, they'd done it once a year in June. Then it sort of got put on the shelf until following year. Then somebody would ask the business ‘right who’s going into this role?’ So we changed it and now it’s a bit more fluid . . . Previously it was very reactive. There was no real plan if somebody left. So we created a much more analytical plan to help that process.”*

Thomas, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

This explanation provided by Thomas is reflective of the approach being taken by other organisations too. Interviews demonstrated that HR departments have been keen to focus more resources on succession planning and pro-actively nurturing a talent pipeline. We see this clearly with Case Study J. This is an interesting example. The business operates in the retail sector and the apprenticeship programmes on offer appear to be, at first glance, relatively low skilled with a relatively short course. An argument was put forward by some other interviewees, including trade union representatives and those in the heavier trades, that considering such programmes as ‘apprenticeships’ undermines the very concept of the apprenticeship. There is of course a legitimate discussion to be had about the quality of apprenticeship frameworks as the state has focused on increasing the quantity of apprenticeships available, however the case study in question provides an interesting rebuttal to the suggestion that programmes such as these are inferior to others.

*“Being honest, we don’t really want to hire the kid out of school who wants to come here to kill time before heading off to uni or to find themselves. We want somebody who even at a young age sees themselves in retail longer term. We want to take them, we want to bottle their energy, their enthusiasm, give them the*

*knowledge, the skills, the guidance they need and we want them to launch themselves up the ladder. We don't want to train these young people to sit on a till in 2 years time, we want them running the store, we want them progressing regionally . . . It's all about us developing our own talent."*

Kevin, Management Level, Case Study J.

This is an interesting example because of how it relates to the talent pipeline debate. Apprentices are trained initially in basic customer service tasks, but the apprenticeship programme is seen as both a sifting tool to find those in the labour market committed to the industry long term, and to provide a firm grounding in the basics of the industry to these new recruits that can then help to catapult apprentices up the corporate ladder.

*"If we have a senior figure who leaves us, we want to replace them from within. So we bring in apprentices, train them up and give them as much experience of the entire business as we can. They learn everything. We learn everything about them. Then when the next lot leave us, that first batch takes the reigns, and we keep pumping apprentices through to keep it all churning."*

Umar, HR Staff Member, Case Study J.

Case Study J is the clearest example of a strong succession plan linked explicitly to apprenticeships, but it is by no means the only one. For committed employers with a strong desire to develop their workforce, apprenticeships and succession planning are inextricably linked. There were multiple interviews conducted within committed employer case studies with former apprentices who themselves have successfully progressed within their company, and they all noted that their apprenticeship upbringing allowed them to understand the organisation from the ground up. This process of knowledge accumulation and bonding between employer and employee was then understood as the ideal scenario of apprenticeship engagement. Job advertisements for apprenticeships with these companies were analysed as part of the documentary analysis, and these adverts

for positions at committed employers had a strong tendency to explicitly note that there would be considerable scope for development and progression for apprentices, echoing what was said in the interviews. Another theme also served to link apprenticeships to succession planning, and that was the growing fear held by employers over the age of the workforce, and the perceived need to replenish the skills, knowledge and qualifications of existing staff who will potentially leave their employ.

### *Generational Change - Ageing Workforce*

There was evidence found within every single case study organisation of concern around the average age of the workforce and the fear that a significant portion of workers would soon be retiring. This fear however was most acute within the committed employer quadrant.

*“We could be set to lose nearly a third of our staff in the next 5 years or so.”*

Megan, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

*“We lost a lot [of workers] to retirement during Covid. There’s probably more of that to come.”*

Kathleen, Management Level, Case Study B.

*“You look at the ages, we see how long some have been here, it’s obvious people can’t stick around forever. But there’s a dual threat that I see. Firstly, it’s the bodies. The sheer numbers concern me. You are talking a high percentage, can we handle that? And then you are talking about losing people that know the game inside and out. The ones who’ve been there and done it. Even if you went and got the same number of bodies in the very next day, they won’t have that same knowledge. I’d say it’s impossible for them to have that experience. So you can’t just think ‘I’ll go and hire a replacement’ because they don’t exist. We need to*

*basically start all over again. You need to train people up the way they were trained up.”*

Daly, HR Staff Member, Case Study G.

Case Study D provides a very interesting example here. Operating in the drinks industry, as was discussed within the *Case Study Overview Chapter*, this organisation only a few years ago would have been considered a dismissive employer, holding a negative view of apprenticeships, and refusing to engage. However, interviews with HR staff provide an explanation for the change in the organisational approach.

*“Yeah, so we’ve got employees who’ve worked for us for sort of 40 odd years and we see a lot of retirement coming up as well, just from really following when the business started when we bought over the distilleries and stuff like that. They’re all coming up to that retirement age, probably our core workforce like age is around like probably 45 to 55. So obviously those that are reaching that 55 are starting to think about retirement and cause we are working on our five year plan, a lot of our workforce won’t still be here at the end of it . . .*

*So we decided to introduce apprenticeships, we have a plan in place for it . . . and every opportunity that there’s recruitment, we’re saying why don’t you bring in an apprentice? You know it’s good for succession planning.”*

Gemma, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

It is absolutely evident that the ageing workforce is having a significant impact upon apprenticeship engagement in Scotland, particularly within committed employers. The interviews within each case study demonstrate this but again, recruitment documents as well as other examples of internal organisational analysis amplify the point. There is a broadly held belief among staff members within committed employer organisations that the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged people to either seek early retirement, or to reconsider how they wished to spend

the remainder of their working life. This pressure felt around employees exiting is then exacerbated further by the pressure felt by organisations at the other end, when recruiting the new generation entering the workforce.

### *Generational Change - Perception of Young People and the Blank Canvas*

Data very clearly demonstrate that there is a broadly held consensus that the new generation entering the workforce is less prepared for the world of work than previous generations. This belief is held across all types of employers within Bredgaard's typology (2017). Interviews within every single case study organisation exhibited these views to some extent. What is interesting to note is that committed employers are often motivated to engage because of this commonly held belief. Rather than being put off engaging with apprenticeships over fears that young workers may not be work ready, many committed employer organisations seem to be motivated to engage with apprenticeships by this because they understand apprenticeships as a vehicle through which the organisation can provide the training, mentorship and guidance young workers need to be able to succeed in a professional environment.

*"We know what the risks are but we are going to need to employ this generation anyway, at some point or another. Why not do it now? Why should we sit back and wait to bring them in a decade down the line . . . with all their bad habits . . . when we can get some good ones in now and teach them the right way to do things?"*

Jimmy, Management Level, Case Study F.

*"I'm a big advocate of hiring young people. Very big. And look, they're no always going to hit the ground running. You get some that will miss a couple of Monday's when they're hungover. Or they're glued to their phone when they think people aren't looking. But believe me, I'm no daft. I see it all. I done it all. You can't kid a kidder. So, you have a wee word, you give them a boot up the backside when*

*they need it, or a wee arm round if that's what it takes. And we get them there in the end."*

Kieran, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

*"It suits us to bring them in early. Apprenticeships are perfect for getting young people into shape, believe me . . . Aye, there is a learning curve . . . but I'd rather they experienced that learning curve at 18 or 21 rather than at 35."*

Stuart, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.

These representative quotes help to illustrate effectively how employers understand apprenticeships as a tool to not just recruit young people, but as an effective method for ensuring that those they do hire adjust to the demands of working life as quickly as possible. Similar quotes can be found in interviews with almost all middle management level staff and above within committed employer organisations, with HR staff particularly espousing these ideas. There is no documentary evidence that supports this further, but interview data is emphatic that negative perceptions of young people entering the labour market encourages committed employers to engage with apprenticeships, rather than discourages.

This is tied to the desire of committed employers to utilise apprenticeships to further a 'blank canvas' approach, a direct phrase used within several interviews and across various case studies. It was made clear from the interviews that a significant appeal of apprenticeships is the opportunity to recruit young people with little knowledge or experience of other ways of working. This, the logic suggests, then presents the employer with a perfect opportunity to educate, train and guide the apprentice the way that they want, moulding both their technical skills and workplace behaviours to suit the needs and culture of the organisation. The apprentices are mere blank canvases, unspoiled by previous paint, waiting to be coloured by the employer.

*"They come to us brand new, if you like. A blank canvas. We can instil*

*organisational values from day one.”*

Megan, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

*“I think it’s easier managing apprentices, being honest. You’ve more freedom to shape them . . . you can teach them about the business, but also about life. I like to give them an old-school grounding . . . I think they need that.”*

Siobhan, Management Level, Case Study G.

*“We’ve had it before where we’ve brought in someone with major experience, top CV. I think he spent maybe 20 odd years at a competitor. On paper, that should have been a fantastic hire. You couldn’t fault the guy. But then when people come in, they’ve got their ways of working. They want to do things a different way . . . not saying there’s anything wrong with how others work, it’s just different . . . there can be a clash.*

*You don’t get that with an apprentice. They’re just so keen to learn, they’re like sponges soaking it all up. It’s then our job to take that enthusiasm and shape it . . . and get them working the [company] way.”*

Hannes, HR Staff Member, Case Study B.

Beyond the case studies, additional interviews with learning providers, skills practitioners and pro-business groups all demonstrated that this is commonly understood as a significant selling point of apprenticeships for those employers keen to invest in human capital and to develop a talent pipeline. An interview with a trade union representative as part of Case Study I provided an example of an employer and a trade union working collaboratively to induct, socialise, train and guide apprentices to overcome the perceived pitfalls of hiring young people. It is also suggested by some HR staff that they have encountered occasional instances of resistance to hiring apprentices by middle management due to fears around the behaviour and values of young people, however by framing apprenticeships as a



vehicle for teaching new hires the right way of working, such concerns are generally ameliorated. Data has been presented demonstrating the role of workforce investment and development in driving the behaviour of committed employers, however it is also shown that some of these organisations are not moved to engage by this thinking, but instead engage with apprenticeships as a form of organisational altruism.

### Apprenticeships as Altruism

Every committed employer, to some degree, discussed investing in the workforce as being a motivating factor in its approach to apprenticeships, however the same is also true of using apprenticeships as a force for the greater good. Within interviews conducted with each organisation deemed a committed employer, notions of apprenticeships enabling the organisation to “give back to local communities” and to provide opportunities, particularly for young people, feature heavily. For some committed employers, it was made clear that this was the primary motivating factor influencing apprenticeship engagement.

*“They [apprenticeships] are a good way of showing we care. We aren’t just coming in, taking the money and bolting. We are providing opportunities.”*

Kathleen, Management Level, Case Study B.

*“Being a responsible corporate citizen is central to everything we do, or at least I like to think it is. So apprenticeships are a big part of that.”*

Siobhan, Management Level, Case Study G.

In other instances however, specifically where workforce development is the primary motivator as has previously been discussed, giving back to communities is a more peripheral factor.

*“Apprenticeships are good for the business, period. But if we can do some good in return, then of course we are happy to try to give back.”*

Kristi, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

The desire to act as a responsible organisation and to provide opportunities to young people is obviously commendable, however within committed organisations that are primarily motivated by these ideas, there is a tendency for this to impact how the employment relationship is viewed. Interviews with staff in these companies, particularly senior staff, demonstrate that rather than seeing the apprenticeship employment relationship as being a reciprocal economic agreement in which both parties mutually benefit, the relationship is instead repeatedly framed with the employer being understood as a benevolent altruist, whilst the apprentice is depicted as a fortunate beneficiary of organisational generosity.

*“We like to give people a chance and you just hope people understand that this is a great company to work for . . . you’d hope there’s a bit of gratitude there, and you’d hope they grasp the opportunity with both hands.”*

Hannes, HR Staff Member, Case Study B.

*“It’s all well and good us playing our part, but I think it goes both ways. If we bring someone in, put them through training, invest our time and money, then they should show some loyalty to us and that hasn’t always happened.”*

Daly, HR Staff Member, Case Study G.

This framing of the employment relationship as being a favour bestowed by the organisation is perhaps best embodied by Case Study B. This organisation is enthusiastic about apprenticeships and this assertion is supported by analysis of interview and documentary data. An interview with a very senior source however told an extraordinary tale. Throughout the interview, this source reiterated his passion for employing people. Being a former apprentice himself, he expressed a

determination to offer the type of opportunity and grounding afforded to him at the start of his career. He then told a short story of an apprenticeship scheme that the organisation ran which was closed by the Scottish Government.

*“What we used to do, we would bring in 12 kids every year but we didn’t pay them. We paid the apprentices who we brought in who were the top ones . . . we always take someone from an underprivileged area . . . but we ran a wee programme that came back and bit us on the tail. We were taking kids off the streets, speaking to their parents, and we brought some kids in, we said ‘look, we’ll pay for the training, we’ll pay for them to get a qualification after 3 years, and we’ll pay expenses but we can’t actually afford to pay them’. Which is a great idea because these kids were going nowhere. And the parents couldn’t thank us enough . . .*

*This was going great for 18 months, then the second year we took on another 12, so at one stage had 24 kids going through and they would all, after 3 years, have been fully qualified. And if we couldn’t keep them, they’d have had a qualification they could never have got. HMRC found about it and hit us with a massive big bill . . . I wrote to the Scottish Government at the time and they said what I was doing was illegal and blah blah blah. So no assistance, so sadly we couldn’t afford the 24 and unfortunately we had to (let them go) . . . we were already spending about between £3-5 grand a year just to train them. Which we took on as giving something back to the community, but the Scottish Government never saw it that way and HMRC never saw it that way.”*

Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.

This is quite a remarkable quote, with a senior figure at a large Scottish employer admitting to hiring 24 apprentices without paying them. However, it was clear that this was not something that he was ever seeking to hide, as he ultimately viewed the programme created as a positive thing as it offered a means for working class young adults an opportunity to gain qualifications and therefore to improve their life chances. This encapsulates how altruistically driven apprenticeship

engagement can alter the perception of the employer-apprentice relationship as in this instance it was never considered that these apprentices were working for the company and contributing to organisational outputs without being paid. By understanding apprenticeships as a form of charity, the true nature of the relationship between employer and employee can become distorted, and there is an increased risk of exploitation occurring in these instances.

It is clear from the evidence gathered that ostensibly altruistic motivations appear to have a considerable impact on the thought process of some committed employers within this study. It is also the case that this often causes employers to frame the apprenticeship in benevolent terms, rather than as an economic agreement between two mutually benefitting parties. The *Discussion Chapter* will provide further in-depth analysis of this. With data presented relating to committed employers, the upcoming section will provide the same for sceptical employers.

### Sceptical Employers

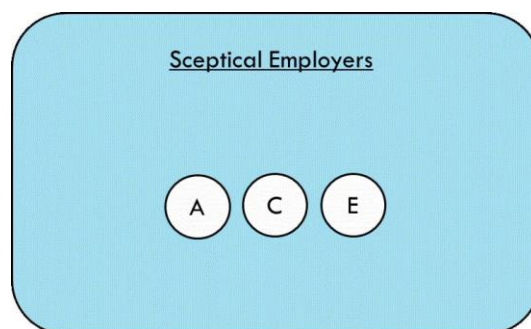


Figure 23. Sceptical Employer Placement.

### Overview

Sceptical employers are organisations that choose to engage with apprenticeships,

despite demonstrating a negative prevailing attitude regarding them. Evidence gathered demonstrates that there are three broad reasons given that start to explain why an organisation may choose to engage with apprenticeships without being positive about them. These reasons relate to financial motivations, the need to meet short term recruitment needs, and because apprenticeships may be deemed as the 'done thing' within the industry. Data will be presented which outlines how these ideas are expressed and to demonstrate the role that they play in impacting employer behaviour in relation to apprenticeship engagement.

### Financial Considerations

There are three specific themes that have the most significant impact on organisational decision-making among sceptical employers. Whilst committed employers tended to be influenced by one of two key theoretical perspectives, it is more difficult to draw clear defining lines that apply to all sceptical employers included within this work. One of the most significant themes however revolves around apprenticeship funding and broader financial considerations. Case Study A provides the clearest example of this. An interview with Bruno, who holds a middle management level position within the company, provided a concise overview of the company's position. He explained that they have a successful in-house training programme, that he helped to design and now oversees. This has been required as the range of skills needed within the company is quite broad, and they have a need to train employees in a range of relevant disciplines. Bruno began working to design a suitable training programme, however he was then informed by a senior colleague that the programme would now be for apprentices, as it was believed that there was a financial benefit to the organisation of changing the name of this programme.

*"The training programme we've designed we wouldn't class as an apprenticeship however we've put it through as an apprenticeship so we can get funding from Skills Development Scotland. What we've had to do is we've enrolled the guys on an NVQ in [the trade] and we've done this through [an external company] . . .*

*Now because they are doing that as part of the overall 4-year course that I've designed, then we can class it as an apprenticeship. I suppose if we were to really dumb it down, I would just call it a trainee programme."*

Bruno, Management Level, Case Study A.

This interview excerpt very clearly explains the surface level motivation for the company's apprenticeship engagement. It is also worth noting that a few months after the interviews for this case study had concluded, the company advertised to fill the type of position that Bruno spoke of. Within this advertisement it depicted a training programme identical to what Bruno had set out, however the job was framed as a trainee position, rather than as an apprenticeship. Further interviews conducted within the case study highlighted the reasons for a negative view of apprenticeships prevailing within the company, with participants citing displeasure over the apprenticeship levy, the perceived administrative burden associated with apprenticeships, the design of the apprenticeship frameworks and the difficulty of operating as a UK wide company navigating different apprenticeship contexts, particularly across Scotland and England. Interviews do still stress the organisational need to recruit and train staff, acknowledging industry skills challenges. The overwhelming sense however is that such recruitment and training would not need to be deemed an apprenticeship if it were not for funding considerations. There was also acknowledgement that renaming this as an apprenticeship enables the company to hire young and determined staff members for a lower cost than hiring a full-time, permanent contracted employee. This then takes us on to consider different forms of financial motivation, including perceived potential savings on salary.

*"You're getting in boys who are probably willing to do double the work for sometimes half the pay. Say you get a young guy in who's 21. He's going to do a lot more work for you, probably cheaper at the same time, than what a guy who's maybe 55 is doing there. He's coming up for retirement, he can't be bothered anymore. So that's a big benefit."*

Ross, Management Level, Case Study A.

The language used is similar to a remark made in an interview by another sceptical employer interviewee participant.

*“No, it’s a wider thing than that, the money we pay, I don’t think that is what forces the issue here. I don’t know how much thought has gone into it historically . . . I mean, aye it probably helps, you can pay a young person, fresh out school, college, you know . . . you do sometimes get an energy from the young team . . . they won’t be starting off on the mega-bucks you pay at top end of market, so it doesn’t hurt in that sense.”*

Thomas, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

These quotes are illuminating and present a similar message within two different sceptical employers with staff that have quite different outlooks overall, however both suggest that lowered salary expectations for apprentices potentially plays a role, although not likely a defining one. Thomas notes in his interviews that he believes his own organisation has been apathetic towards apprenticeships and engages as a matter of habit rather than appearing to make a conscious choice. This is a perspective which will be discussed in greater depth in upcoming sections. Ross however proactively advocates on behalf of his organisation’s position, outlining how perceived lower cost makes apprenticeships appealing to employers. In both instances though, we see clearly how an organisation might exhibit a negative prevailing attitude toward apprenticeships but continue to engage.

Within Case Study C, there is no evidence of salary as a motivator within available data, and there is no explicit mention of rebadging as is found with Case Study A, however there is an implicit suggestion that rebadging may possibly occur in some instances. An interview within Case Study C with Claire, who’s key responsibility lies in training and recruitment, hinted at funding as being a potential motivating factor for apprenticeship engagement. She discussed a range of different grants and financial support that the company accesses to support apprenticeship

training, highlighting that this has influenced the decision to set out the roles as apprenticeships, without going as far as to admitting to renaming an existing programme.

*“We have skills we need, shortages to fill . . . but with this training, if you were to pay for it without the help we get with apprenticeships it probably wouldn’t be possible for us to sustain the kind of numbers we put through. So it makes sense for us to do it all this way.”*

Claire, GR Staff Member, Case Study C.

Other interviews within Case Study C however did not suggest that any existing programme was renamed to enable funding to be more easily accessed. No such themes relating to funding were detected in analysing interview data and documentary analysis for Case Study E. An interview with a training provider did however provide further insight into how training companies will attempt to market their services with companies by highlighting the financial advantages of apprenticeships, even if the company it is pitching too does not appear to be particularly enthusiastic at the prospect of engaging with apprenticeships.

*“I think you know that companies are looking after their bottom line, always. So, if we meet a potential partner company, they’re maybe a bit hesitant about apprenticeships, you maybe need to talk them round a bit, then bringing it to the money is always a safe bet. So if you can say that we can get them help with funding for training, we can maybe point them in the direction of a grant or two if there’s any available, the pay is obviously lower . . . I’ve seen a couple people just decide to give it a go.”*

Michael, Training Provider.

Other non-case study interviews with trade union representatives and a business representative helped to corroborate Michael’s point, as a clear theme was found within data that shows that those with experience of working with employers in



relation to apprenticeships have found that lowered apprentice salaries can motivate engagement, particularly in the short-term. This then links to the next key theme related to sceptical employer behaviour, and that is the need to meet immediate recruitment needs. The upcoming section will detail data relating to this motivating factor, but what is evident within data to be presented is that a key reason apprenticeships are seen as a useful tool for immediate or short-term recruitment is explicitly because of lowered salary costs.

### Recruiting in the Short-Term

When interviews were conducted within committed employer organisations, and staff members were asked whether they intended to keep on all apprentices following the completion of the apprenticeships, every single participant answered emphatically that the answer was yes. Whether they were primarily driven by a desire to develop human capital, or to provide opportunities within local communities, a longer-term view is taken and committed employers are taking on apprentices with foresight that stretches beyond each apprenticeship period. For sceptical employers however, a more short-term approach emerges from data.

*“Sometimes you need someone in, you know? . . . there’s always stuff to be done, we are lucky enough to be kept busy, but sometimes the thought process is pretty simple. We need a body, an apprentice will do. Get an advert going and let’s see who’s out there.”*

Cameron, Management Level, Case Study C.

When sceptical organisations have been asked about their intentions to keep staff on beyond the period of the qualification, the answers are typically less categorical.

*“If the job is there to give then of course, they’ll be right in the running for it.”*

Javid, HR Staff Member, Case Study A.

*“We try to keep most on. There have been a few in the past we haven’t been able to, for a few different reasons really. There’s never any guarantees in life but we do what we can.”*

Shannan, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

In other instances, we see that within sceptical employers there is a recurring subtheme that these organisations are often primarily focused on bringing in new hires as quickly as possible, again in a way that differs quite significantly from the approach of committed employers.

*“The company sometimes has jobs to fill quite quickly. We want to grow our client base but we can only do that if we have people who can do the work. So there is an external pressure there to manage that.”*

Carl, Management Level, Case Study C.

*“There is a need to focus more on the short term at times, definitely. With recruitment you want to be able to take a longer view and whatever but . . . sometimes you need to be practical. You can’t always plan 5 years out. Sometimes you need an [someone] in right away.”*

Javid, HR Staff Member, Case Study A.

Several interview participants who were spoken to outside the scope of the case studies expressed fears over this type of approach, linking it explicitly to lowered apprentice wages. An interview with Liam, a trade union regional organiser and case worker, laid out the contextual factors that he believes could potentially create a situation in which an apprentice was being exploited.

*“Not to blow my own horn or that but I’ve a fair bit of experience on all this now. It’s no often I praise employers but if I’m being really honest, we’ve some*

*companies like . . . who are really good when it comes to apprentices. Decent pay, good conditions, and they invest time into them to give them an actual career path. I've no qualms with that . . . they want apprentices to do well. They set out from the start to make sure there's a proper plan in place. They want these youngsters with them for the long haul. But the other side of that, the other side is the company that's only looking at the next balance sheet. They only care about short term targets. Again, if I'm honest, I don't think some of them are bothered about whether it's apprenticeships, internships, agency workers, whatever. Get the bodies in, get them cheap, and when they're not needed? See you later. There's the door. Next please . . . It's these guys I worry about. And they get away with it."*

Liam, Trade Union Regional Organiser.

Whilst there is no definitive evidence of a case study organisation involved in this research undertaking this approach, the description provided by an experienced trade unionist who has dealt with a range of employers regarding apprenticeships demonstrates that employers that do engage in this strategy are often characterised by short-term thinking and a negative attitude towards apprenticeships. Interviews with apprentices outside the scope of the case studies then demonstrate explicitly that this practice continues to occur in Scotland in different ways.

*"I was only in my apprenticeships for like 3 months, maybe just more than that. They never really said why, just that I was being let go, they couldn't keep me. I was never in bother or that, but we were close to finishing up the job we'd been on . . . I know they had some more work, but not a lot . . . I did feel a bit used."*

Eamon, Apprentice.

*"I was coming up to the end. My manager wouldn't really go into detail about keeping me on, but just said it would be fine, don't worry, that sort of thing. Then I don't know, I could sense a change. The longer it went, the less she'd give*

*away almost. And then it was a case of thanks for everything, but there's no job here. I was raging."*

Jordan, Apprentice.

Both of these instances occurred within large employers in Scotland. The interviews provide further depth, depicting a range of exploitative practices. A further interview with a member of a business representative organisation also acknowledged that this "kind of thing probably does go on" whilst also noting that it is extremely difficult to gauge how prevalent the practice is. Evidence demonstrates that sceptical employers may actively opt to use apprenticeships to manage short-term recruitment needs, however there is also evidence of some sceptical employers engaging with apprenticeships in part because of a less conscious process, driven in part by a belief that apprenticeship engagement is simply expected of them.

#### Industry Expectation - Apprenticeships as 'The Done Thing'

Some sceptical organisations appear to be passively following perceived industry expectations in continuing to engage with apprenticeships. This takes the form of employers engaging with apprenticeships because it is understood as being the 'done thing'. We find discussions of this nature within all sceptical employers, though the extent to which this influences employer behaviour differs. Within Case Study E, data show that the belief that apprenticeship engagement is expected within the industry is a significant factor in driving employer behaviour. This company has tended to employ people in in Scotland in key hubs, based in traditional industrial heartlands. Interviews with staff members have highlighted that apprenticeships have long been a fact of life within the company, and that staff members believe that apprenticeships are 'to be expected' within the industry.

*"I've worked here a while now and there's always been apprentices . . . we've*

*always done them since I came, and I know they done it long before too. It's always just been one of they things, it's just what you do."*

Kieran, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

*"Aye, I think when you look at the trades we need, apprenticeships are to be expected. I probably see the good and the bad from it, but I don't think much will change. In a place like this, the industry we're in, the work we do, it's just always been apprenticeships we use to get young lads in and get them trained up."*

Thomas, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

Interview data from Case Study E provide evidence of some organisational dissatisfaction with elements of the apprenticeship experience, including mentions of perceived burdensome bureaucracy, concerns regarding qualification frameworks and discussions of occasional negative experiences with past apprentices. However, at no point does any interviewee consider the possibility of changing the company's approach. There is a passivity that participants acknowledge is unlikely to change.

*"I know I like a moan but no, I don't see us doing anything different for the foreseeable future. The nature of the work we do, you're always going to need apprenticeships. It's maybe not always been terribly well planned out . . . but we probably still make it work. Would I like a bit more bang for our buck? Absolutely. But we'll still keep doing what we do."*

Thomas, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

Within data collected relating to the other sceptical case study organisations, there is evidence that other employers are influenced by this consideration, but in a manner that appears to be less pronounced. Within Case Study A for example, an organisation primarily engaging with apprenticeships to pursue financial support, interview data suggests that perceived industry expectations still act to shape the

organisational approach to apprenticeships.

*“I look at our sector and I know plenty of guys in this line of work [who are] based elsewhere. Most of them take on apprentices. And if they do it, and they’re getting all this young talent in early doors, they’re seeing the financial upside, then we can’t afford to fall behind . . . I mean if everyone else is doing it and we’re not, then there’s probably a problem somewhere.”*

Ross, Management Level, Case Study A.

Similar language is found within interview data for Case Study C. The language is less definitive than found in Case Study E and seems to be more about framing the decisions taken after the fact, rather than showing that the decision-making process around apprenticeship engagement is explicitly driven by a desire to imitate other employers.

*“It’s probably best taken as a good sign, other similar companies do pretty much the same thing we do, I have some gripes and whatever . . . but I think that probably tells you it’s the right thing.”*

Cameron, Management Level, Case Study C.

An interview with a member of a fair work group, who has vast experience of engaging with employers, trade unions and skills bodies, explained clearly that she has encountered evidence of employers engaging with apprenticeships largely because they believe it is expected of them.

*“In academic language, you get this mimetic isomorphism where businesses start to look like each other. They go and learn from each other.”*

Hanin, Fair Work Advocate.

This point was also supported further in an interview with a skills practitioner, who

explicitly linked mimetic isomorphism to employers with a negative attitude to apprenticeships.

*“There are some HR people you talk to, or whatever position. They might not be too keen on apprenticeships, or just might not be that bothered, but the company has just always done it. Every company in their position brings in apprentices, so they do it too. Nobody can remember how or why it started but because these types of companies maybe focus their strategic thinking elsewhere, it can be hard to get them to have a more positive outlook and consider taking more on.”*

Justin, Skills Practitioner.

The evidence demonstrates that there is a perception in some industries that impacts the decision-making process of sceptical employers, even when it potentially appears as though there is little active though and possible institutional inertia.

### Engaged Employers: Conclusion

Data gathered demonstrates that committed employers are primarily motivated by either a strategy of investing in the workforce or a desire to give back to local communities by providing opportunities. We can also see that for those employers driven by workforce investment, there are a range of sub-themes related to that which help shape organisational behaviour. With those motivated largely by a sense of organisational altruism, it is evident that this shifts the employer perception of the employment relationship between employer and apprentice. These different understandings impact how these types of committed employers engage with apprenticeships.

With sceptical employers, there are three primary themes derived from data that most significantly influence employer behaviour. Financial considerations play a considerable role in motivating some of these organisations to engage with

apprenticeships, though this can occur in different ways. There is clear evidence of one organisation rebadging existing roles as apprenticeships to claim apprenticeship funding. There also appears to be potential for sceptical employers to engage with apprenticeships having been enticed by the prospect of paying lower salaries, particularly to bring workers in on apprentice wages to fill short term gaps. It is also the case that in some instances, engagement is less of a conscious decision and part of a broader passivity driven by a belief that apprenticeships need to be engaged with because it is the 'done thing' within the industry. All these key points will be critically analysed in greater depth within the *Discussion Chapter*.



## Chapter 6. Non-Engaged Employers

### Overview

Of the eleven case studies conducted as part of the research, two organisations do not engage with apprenticeships. One of these organisations is a passive employer, with a positive prevailing view of apprenticeships, and the other is a dismissive employer, with a negative prevailing attitude towards apprenticeships. Like the placement of employers within the sceptical employer quadrant, the placement of Case Study Employer K within the passive quadrant of Bredgaard's (2017) typology supports the contention of his framework. The point is reinforced that there is no direct correlation between prevailing organisational attitude to apprenticeships and willingness to engage with them. This chapter presents the evidence gathered relating to passive and dismissive employers.

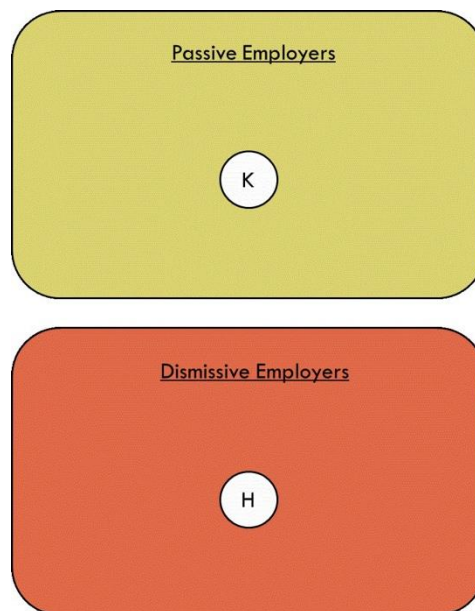


Figure 24. Non-Engaged Employer Placement.

Most of the chapter focuses on Case Study K and Case Study H, as these are the only case study organisations that do not engage with apprenticeships. However, four additional interviews have been conducted with HR staff at separate

organisations that also appear to fall into one of these two categories, thus their views and experiences will also be detailed and considered. The chapter will be formatted to focus on the key issues derived from data. Sceptical employers it is shown can be unwilling to engage with apprenticeships because they are deemed unsuitable for the organisation. The refusal of dismissive employers to engage with apprenticeships can be attributed to an organisational strategy that emphasises employer flexibility.

### Passive Employers

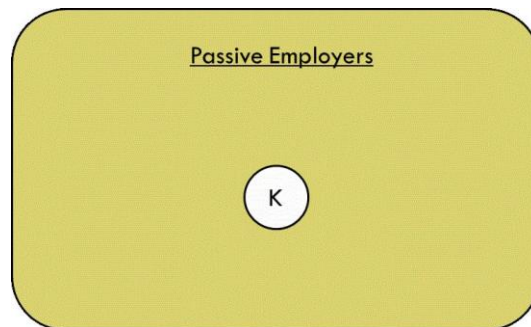


Figure 25. Passive Employer Placement.

### *Overview*

Data is presented first relating to passive employers. Passive employers do not engage with apprenticeships but demonstrate a positive prevailing attitude regarding them. There is only one case study organisation deemed a passive employer, however two additional interviews have been conducted with HR staff members within other large organisations in Scotland, both of whom also appear to meet the criteria of the passive employer. It is important to acknowledge that data suggests that these organisations tend to be non-profit seeking organisations. The primary factor that most significantly impacts the behaviour and decision making of passive employers is the perception of the suitability of apprenticeships for

these organisations, and the lack of understanding of available apprenticeship frameworks.

### *Suitability and Understanding*

Data gathered makes it clear, both within Case Study K and in additional interviews with HR staff in other passive organisations, that the primary explanation for why an organisation would have a positive view of apprenticeships but not engage, is that apprenticeships are often deemed unsuitable by that organisation. It is a simple yet important point that frames how passive employer behaviour can be understood. This came up in every single interview conducted relating to a passive employer.

*“At root, it’s just that apprenticeships aren’t the right fit for us.”*

Jacynta, HR Staff Member.

*“I think if there was a good, like workable option [for apprenticeships] we would jump at it. But it is just the way it goes, it probably just isn’t something we can manage the right way.”*

Chloe, HR Professional, Interviewed Individually.

*“Suitability. That is the issue in a nutshell.”*

Grant, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.

However, this is only the starting point to grappling with passive employer attitude and engagement. Once it became apparent within the interviews that passive employers are unlikely to engage with apprenticeships if it is felt that the approach is not suitable for the organisation, the conversations typically turned to recruitment strategy to really dig into what types of roles are available, and why

apprenticeships would not be a suitable model to use. Case Study K is a massive employer in Scotland, with over 5,000 staff members and branches based across the country. Most of the recruitment of the organisation is focused on one primary role that needs filled across different settings and contexts. This therefore shapes the broader recruitment strategy of the organisation.

*“Our recruitment is a bit different to most. Almost every job we have to fill is just the exact same position. Most of the people we hire don’t necessarily have experience in [the role type] and we don’t really focus on qualifications or whatever. We have a profile I guess, of the type of person that we think suits this line of work. And it doesn’t matter if someone has been a taxi driver for 20 years, or worked on reception somewhere, worked in a bar, whatever. We are more interested in their personal characteristics.”*

Joseph, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

The above quote is taken from a single interview within the case study, however other interviews produced a very similar outline. The organisation, particularly the HR department, is united in its approach and fully understands both the organisational direction and the stated rationale behind the strategy. An interview with Niamh, a staff member in the HR department, explains how people are trained in these roles, even if they have never done similar work before.

*“We have a short, but I’d say quite intensive training programme. We need people to hit the ground running . . . which is why we put so much time and energy getting recruitment right. That’s probably the key. We get people in that we can see doing this because it’s not for everyone. You need a certain kind of personality. Then we show them the ropes a bit, we get them ready and we get them out there doing it basically right away.”*

Niamh, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

Within Case Study K, the recruitment and training programme seems well

established and well supported internally. Six months after conducting the initial interviews, a check was done on the company website where jobs are advertised. At that point, there were one hundred jobs available for application, yet none were apprenticeships. Most jobs pertained to the one single role previously described that could be done in various settings and contexts across Scotland. This organisation finds itself in unique circumstances, but additional interviews with other HR staff outside the scope of the case studies have demonstrated that this belief that some large employers are simply not suitable for apprenticeships extends beyond the case study organisation.

*“I would honestly say that I have been a big advocate for apprenticeships in the past. I’ve pushed them loads throughout my career, even to young people I know . . . but I don’t think we are in a position to offer them just because of the kinds of jobs we have. Believe me, I would if I could, it just doesn’t make sense for us.”*

Chloe, HR Professional, Interviewed Individually.

Interviews outside the scope of the case studies provides further evidence of other employers with a positive view of apprenticeships, but that do not engage due to the perception of apprenticeships as being incompatible with the roles available. Language expressing these views is apparent in interviews with HR professionals, training providers and skills practitioners. One interview with a representative of a business interests group seemed to confirm that this position is often taken by passive employers, whilst also noting that this type of employer can often be motivated to engage with apprenticeships if they can be convinced that there is an appropriate apprenticeship framework that can be incorporated into the business plan.

*“I think, yeah, some sort of like the idea of [apprenticeships] but then say that they can’t bring any on . . . the work they do means they don’t need apprentices. It happens. That said, it’s usually these types of companies that can be nudged along in the right direction. Sometimes they just need a heads up. Too many people still just think of apprenticeships as for boys from Govan down the*

*shipyards, you know what I mean? I think if they can be shown, you can have IT, admin staff, management programmes, get this working for them. Some are quite happy to listen I'd say."*

Barry, Business Interests Group Representative.

This seems a pretty fair appraisal of what influences Case Study K's approach. It therefore also seems likely that this position is indeed held by other large employers in Scotland. The point that Barry makes is that apprenticeships are sometimes understood as being primarily related to industrial trades, and there was one interview with a staff member within Case Study K that to implicitly supported this assertion.

*"I think apprenticeships are great, it is such a good way to learn a trade . . . more people should do it, there is always a need for good quality tradesmen."*

Maria, Management Level, Case Study K.

There is nothing within this quote that is not true, but it perhaps alludes to a way of thinking about apprenticeships that focuses quite narrowly on older, more traditional frameworks. Within the interviews relating to Case Study K, there is no explicit claim made that only these types of apprenticeship exist, however there is some subtle use of language that perhaps suggests that an unconscious, slightly dated view of apprenticeships shapes the organisational perspective. This is also highlighted with the repeated use of gendered language, with some words found with regularity within the interview data, such as "boys" and "guys", often linked to discussions around "trades" and "tradesmen".

This is more explicitly discussed within an interview with a HR professional outside the scope of the case studies, but who works for a non-profit organisation that meets the criteria of a passive employer.

*"I mean, if you're asking if some people have an old-fashioned view of*

*apprenticeships, yeah, I would say so. For people of a certain age, they've maybe grown up with the old YTS system. You try and talk to them about graduate apprenticeships in IT or data science, they've probably not got a clue . . . it's definitely not the only factor, there's loads of things to consider, but it doesn't help, I'll say that much."*

Chloe, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.

Another interview, again outside the scope of the case study, with an HR professional who works for a separate passive employer did not present evidence of an outdated understanding of apprenticeships, but rather suggested a lack of any real understanding.

*"[Apprenticeships] are not really something I've encountered. I know what they are obviously, I'm sure they're great for young people leaving school. But [organisation name] haven't shown much interest since I've been here anyway . . .*

*I wouldn't say I know too much about that [apprenticeship frameworks]. I don't know if there's anything out there that would suit us. We are pretty happy with what we do, but apprenticeships haven't really come across our radar."*

Grant, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.

The interview repeatedly touches on the theme of a lack of understanding, suggesting that some employers still lack the knowledge to engage with apprenticeships. However, analysis of the other additional interviews conducted demonstrates that the consensus among apprenticeship stakeholders, including HR staff, skills practitioners, learning providers, fair work advocates, business representatives and apprentices, is that employers now broadly have a strong and growing knowledge of apprenticeship frameworks, and that employers with either an outdated understanding, or general lack of understanding, are rarely found in Scotland.

*“No, I’d say most have a good idea of what is available now.”*

Justin, Skills Practitioner.

*“It’s pretty rare that you speak to somebody who has no real clue. Apprenticeships haven’t appeared from nowhere, it’s the employers that have shaped them . . . you’ll get the occasional person who maybe needs a bit of direction, but by and large, these companies know the score.”*

Ryan, Learning Provider.

*“I’d say that was more an issue back 5/10 years ago maybe. People would maybe hear apprenticeship and think about building sites and factories. But to be fair to SDS, they’ve got the word out pretty well . . . the adverts, apprenticeship month, some of the events they’ve put on. I think it’s all helped . . . so people have a better grasp now on the options and how wide they are compared to back in the day.”*

Liam, Trade Union Regional Organiser.

The extent to which an imperfect understanding of apprenticeships contributes to the employer behaviour of passive employers in relation to apprenticeship engagement is therefore slightly unclear, however the evidence suggests that this does still bare some impact. It is also important to note that Case Study K was initially founded as a charity, and now operates as a third sector organisation. It provides help and support to people across Scotland, often helping young people into education, training, and employment. This no doubt helps to shape the positive view held of apprenticeships.

*“We work so hard to get young people into work, and apprenticeships are such a great opportunity.”*

Maria, Management Level, Case Study K.



The question then becomes if the organisation is so positive about apprenticeships, and works to try to help people find apprenticeship opportunities, why doesn't it modify the roles available within the organisation to provide such opportunity internally? Documentary data gathered demonstrate that the organisation has a good reputation as an employer, paying the living wage and adhering to the Scottish Government principles of Fair Work. As the organisation has a set way of recruiting and training, with relatively short training periods, the interview data demonstrate that the decision has been made to not engage with apprenticeships because it is felt that a full apprenticeship for this role is unnecessary, and that if the organisation was to engage on this basis, it would be needlessly prolonging the training time of staff. This would likely mean these workers would be paid less as apprentices than as full-time permanent staff members. Opting for this approach it is deemed would contravene the values and ethos of the organisation.

*"We did discuss it, you know you could do it, probably quite easily. We could bring in some apprentices, you can save a bit of cash, have them doing qualifications for a year or whatever while they work. There's probably people out there who do this kind of thing, but it's just not us. It's not what we are about."*

Jacynta, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

*"I'd say we are quite proud of how we do things. This is a good place to work, we pay people fairly, we try to treat people with dignity . . . I can't see any circumstances in which we would bring in an apprentice just because it's maybe a bit cheaper."*

Joseph, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

*"One thing we try and do is get people ready quickly. Get them trained and that, but we want people to be themselves, intuition, personality, things like that are important. That works for us. So if we get people out there [doing the job] then I don't think someone being called an apprentice for a couple years would make them any better or worse . . . and if they're just as good, why should they be paid*

*less?”*

Maria, Management Level, Case Study K.

Some additional interviews outside the scope of the case studies with HR staff who work for non-profit passive employers did not depict the same explicit thought process, however they did intimate that their respective organisations do not appear to prioritise cutting labour costs and that this does influence the decision to not engage with apprenticeships.

*“Even if it was cheaper [to hire apprentices], that’s probably not a consideration for us . . . that’s not how we’d measure success.”*

Grant, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.

*“I can definitely understand if you’re a small company, doing painting and decorating, plumbing, those kinds of trades, that if you needed an extra pair of hands, the finances of it [hiring apprentices] might be appealing. And I’m not saying we don’t want to cut costs, but we just wouldn’t go down that route I don’t think.”*

Chloe, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.

In the interviews conducted outside the case study with trade union representatives, business group representatives, skills practitioners, and fair work advocates, most of those interviewed rarely touched on this theme. An interesting point was made however by a fair work advocate, who explained that apprenticeships can fit within the fair work framework if they are designed and implemented correctly.

*“I see no reason why an apprentice can’t be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace, the same as anyone else. Some apprenticeships really are brilliant in that regard, so it comes down to the employer, how they put it together, how*

*it's managed.”*

Hanin, Fair Work Advocate.

Apprentices can be treated with dignity and respect, as is outlined by Hanin, however there is a perception that this is not always the case. Passive employers are often committed to fair work principles, yet this negatively impacts the likelihood of engagement in these instances, because of this perception. When considering dismissive employers, however, the dynamics of working practices have a different impact. Rather than pursuing fair work, dismissive employers are often characterised by insecure work models, yet this still has the same outcome, in that these organisations also do not engage with apprenticeships.

### Dismissive Employers

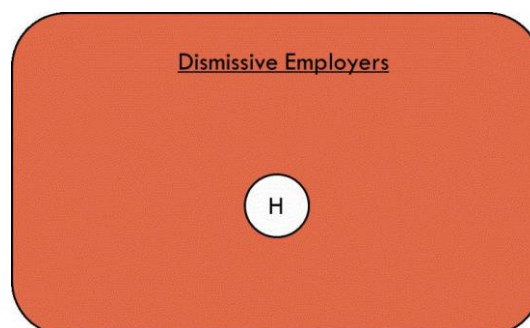


Figure 26. Dismissive Employer Placement.

### *Overview*

Dismissive employers demonstrate a negative prevailing attitude of apprenticeships and do not engage with them. Data suggest that these organisations tend to be profit seeking companies. As was the case with passive employers, there is only one case study with a dismissive employer, however this has been supplemented

with interviews with two HR staff members that work for companies that also meet the criteria of the dismissive employer. Evidence gathered suggests that dismissive employers are dissuaded from engaging with apprenticeships because of the hiring strategies pursued by these organisations, as they tend to prioritise employer flexibility and lowered cost. Recruitment therefore often occurs through subcontractors and agencies, and there is a preference for using temporary, insecure employment contracts.

### *Hiring Practices: Agencies and Subcontractors*

Case Study H is an international company, founded in the 1990s, employing between 500-1000 staff in the UK. It has completed almost 100 significant building projects across the UK in that time and is responsible for several major ongoing works at the time of writing. It operates primarily in the construction trade, meaning that there is a requirement for the type of skills historically associated with apprenticeships in Scotland, yet the company does not engage with apprenticeships in Scotland directly, and demonstrates a prevailing negative attitude towards the prospect of doing so. To understand how this point has been reached, it is important first to start with the organisational approach to how it recruits and employs staff. Interview data helps to clearly set out the company strategy.

*‘We employ labour through labour agencies. If we require anything further like joiners, scaffolders, lift supervisors, you deal with subcontractors. [Case Study H company name] will not employ, unfortunately, see weekly wage staff, well not that they won’t, they’ve looked at it, it’s not a viable option.*

*. . . we’ve a few big projects on the go or in the pipeline here [in the UK] . . . aye, you need bodies to do the work. All the skills and trades you can think of, we usually need them at some point or another. But the game we are in, it’s almost all subcontractors. We will work with local teams we have a relationship with, subcontractors and that . . .*

*. . . but aye we leave that [apprenticeships and training] to them. The way we run things, there's not really a need to bring in too many people directly. If we sit at the top of the pyramid, all of that kind of flows down."*

Greg, Management Level, Case Study H.

Further interviews reiterate this broad explanation, noting that whilst apprentices can sometimes be found on projects run by Employer H, the apprentices are never directly employed by the company, but by smaller associated subcontractors. This is also supported by analysis of the company website, which uses quite careful language in describing its approach to apprenticeships, explaining that the company works closely with supply chain companies to ensure that there are opportunities made available to local communities in the form of apprenticeships, whilst implicitly suggesting that no such opportunities are available with the company itself. Developing on that theme then, it becomes important to explore why this is the case. The interview with Greg goes on to expand on his earlier points, providing further insight into the logic of the choices made.

*"It's pretty prevalent across the industry. I guess one reason is that we make our living with projects mostly. You do a job, get it done and move on. And a project could last months or it could last years . . . so when it comes to how you sort contracts, you need flexibility. You can't bring on guys permanent and then a few weeks later the job finishes, and then what? So aye, flexibility is probably the key word for me."*

Greg, Management Level, Case Study H.

A further two interviews were conducted outside the scope of the case studies with HR professionals working for dismissive employers. These interviews were short and unable to provide the depth provided in the interview with Greg from Case Study H, however the language is strikingly similar.

*“I think we are a good employer but we are responsible, we need to be flexible. That maybe means not getting locked into contracts and training if we don’t know whether the work will be there or not.”*

Lee, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.

*“Apprenticeships don’t fit our model. We have a strategy on how we hire, what risk we are willing to open up to, what costs we think we will see a return on.”*

Asjad, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.

The word flexibility appears within data often as part of these discussions across interviews with Case Study H employees. It is continually cited as an important consideration within recruitment strategy. An interview with another stakeholder with a relationship with the company, whose precise role will not be revealed to protect their identity, had a more critical take on the strategy being pursued.

*“There is definitely a preference towards more insecure contracts and that form of work. Temporary contracts, recruiting through agencies, passing the buck on to smaller firms they bring in. They don’t want to invest in training and they sure as hell don’t want to be caught out committing to people long term . . . it’s no quite at zero hour contracts, that sort of stage, but it still makes it hard for guys at times. It’s the company that retains the power, they decide who works where and when, and for most of the lads that work in these sites, they don’t have much in the way of security.”*

Case Study H Contributor.

The quotes included above present different analysis, and this is examined in further detail within the *Discussion Chapter*. Despite the differences that exist in perspective, there is some consensus over how recruitment is organised within Case Study H. The company opts not to commit contractually to employees, or to

invest much in training, instead relying on its supply chain to manage these things. That said, it is interesting to note that the company does have quite a strong graduate programme for management roles based at headquarters. These are not apprenticeships, but they do involve training and guidance of generally younger staff, and data gathered through interviews and through documentary analysis demonstrate that this programme has strong institutional support. If training and full-time, permanent, or long-term contracts are utilised in this fashion, but not for any apprenticeship framework, it is important to understand why this might be the case. Interview data helps to offer a possible explanation.

*“I think the approach just depends on what is needed, the type of job. For management you probably need people buying in, learning the culture, becoming a part of it. For a joiner on a site for a few months, there’s no the same need is there? . . . You just need someone to come in, do the job and they can move on when it’s done. I think that is usually the aim, and you do sometimes see limiting on contracts, limiting bodies, leaning more on labourers and guys that, I’m not saying they’re no use, but guys who’ve maybe not got quite the same level of skill, the qualifications and whatnot.”*

Brendan, Worker, Case Study H.

*“It’s a management company, it’s no a construction company. I think that’s the way most see it that I deal with.”*

Joe, Worker and Trade Union Rep, Case Study H.

The suggestion that some employers dismiss apprenticeships because of a preference for using insecure forms of work is further supported by interview data outside the scope of the case study. Two interviews are particularly significant, one with an HR professional and one with a construction apprentice. The HR professional operates for an employer in the hospitality industry in a completely different set of circumstances to Case Study H, however expressed similar thoughts and themes found within the case study, often citing flexibility as being key to

organisational employment strategy. The interview with the apprentice however is situated within the construction trade. He had worked as a labourer for a large housing developer, hoping to gain an apprenticeship, but the company's preference for agency work and subcontractors made him realise that in order to attain an apprenticeship, he would be better placed seeking work with a smaller company.

*“Aye, I did want an apprenticeship there at the start but it wasn't for happening . . . some people said they had taken on some on other sites, but I don't know if that's true or what. You speak to the boys you work with, most of the guys with trades were self-employed, or they were subbies [subcontractors] working together . . . you see what goes on, you put two and two together . . . I've a mate with a good apprenticeship for [a different large construction company], so I'm no saying it can't happen or that, but I just thought it would be easier if I went to a smaller mob.”*

Aidan, Apprentice.

Several other interview participants also helped to develop this theme, with some suggesting possible motivating factors behind employer behaviour.

*“Sometimes companies just make a simple calculation to be honest. If they can get away with hiring through agencies, bring in workers that are technically self-employed, that kind of route, that's what they'll do . . . I think it's really about pragmatism, it's about money. For some job types it pays to invest a bit of time and money, and some they know they don't need to bother.”*

Gabrielle, Trade Union Representative.

This type of approach draws considerable criticism. Interviews with skills practitioners, fair work advocates and even some HR professionals present critique of this strategy, but the most pointed criticisms come from the trade unionists who were interviewed. The key difference between other critiques and those made by trade unionists is that the trade unionists tended to argue that job insecurity is an



intended outcome of employer behaviour, as opposed to being an unintended consequence of pragmatic decision making, as is suggested by others.

*“Some employers are baking insecurity into the very foundation of the construction trade.”*

Liam, Trade Union Regional Organiser.

*“We’re obviously not happy with it. The self-employed model, the gig economy stuff just slowly creeping up across the place . . . construction is rife with it . . . employers want to maximise control and maximise profits, that’s it. And then ordinary people pay the price when they don’t know how long they’ll be in work, or when they fall sick and don’t have any sick pay to fall back on.”*

Padraig, Trade Union Representative.

Whilst it is perhaps to be expected that trade unionists would take a dim view of an approach that shuns training, investment and secure employment conditions, it is interesting to note that during an interview with Barry, a representative of a business interests organisation, the discussion includes some criticism of this approach, albeit from a different perspective, and with a more forgiving tone, than the trade unionist participants.

*“Employers need that flexibility, we know it, we hear it all the time. We are on board with that . . . but there does need to be a consideration of the wider ecosystem. It’s all well and good bringing in people here and there, getting jobs done, but there’s a responsibility that belongs to industry as a whole I think to make sure there is investment in the workforce for the future. Businesses can’t afford to be short-sighted here, you need a balance.”*

Barry, Business Interests Group Representative.

When considering this theme, it is also important to finally consider some points

made by skills practitioners. The interviews demonstrate that practitioners take a dim view of employers dismissing apprenticeships due to the pursuit of an approach to skills and recruitment that emphasises employer flexibility and employee insecurity, but it is also evident from interview data that practitioners broadly have not encountered this strategy often, if at all.

*“It might happen, I can’t really remember encountering that type of thing. Obviously, it’s not what we want.”*

Rebecca, Skills Practitioner.

*“You’re going to find, I guess sort of hard-headed employers anywhere in the world aren’t you? That’s just life to be honest. So yeah, there might be some that want that cheaper option . . . that probably does factor in with some people when you talk about apprenticeships, when there’s the training, there’s a real commitment there etcetera . . . it’s really rare in my experience though, to that degree anyway.”*

Helen, Skills Practitioner.

The interview with Rebecca then went on to acknowledge that if an employer was explicitly motivated to dismiss apprenticeship engagement due to an organisational strategy that prioritises contractual flexibility and minimal investment, then they may not engage with skills practitioners and those working in this area very often, as such employers would likely see no need to do so. This would mean that practitioners would rarely encounter these ideas and strategies, however it does not necessarily mean that this does not occur.

Another important aspect of this discussion is how Employer H often secures work on large scale construction projects through open tenders. This involves bidding for jobs by putting forward a prospectus of how the company will complete the work, with guarantees around things like cost, expertise, and time to complete the job. It is also often the case that these tenders will expect guarantees of a social

nature, and there are commitments made within these bids around jobs provided, training and development opportunities, and apprenticeships. Much of the interview discussion with Case Study H participants focused on one specific large project that the company was responsible for delivering in west-central Scotland. Documents were gathered from the bid organisers for this project which highlight the need for winning bids for work on this scale to produce “community benefits”, explicitly citing the need for modern apprenticeship roles to be made available on large projects. This is emphasised by a publicly available report that suggests that the social value of the project is a key measure of its overall success. This is then supported within interview data.

*“It’s quite normal for that kind of thing to be factored in, benefits to the community, providing opportunities, that sort of stuff . . . particularly for public work projects. The tender sets expectations and you need to meet them.”*

Daniel, Management Level, Case Study H.

*“Part of [Case Study H Company] agreement with [the project] is there’s a big, huge social value part, so that’s all about apprentices starting on site, apprentices completing, recruiting unemployed people. And actually other stuff too, doing community events, business events, really stuff that is about building above physical building. Like what other good things are they doing?”*

Mikaela, Case Study H Associate.

Mikaela however continues by explaining that these tender guarantees are generally not specific to the company, but across the entire project, meaning that promises around apprenticeship recruitment can be kept without the bidding company hiring any additional apprentices. This responsibility is passed down the line with subcontractors then being expected to help these targets be met.

*“I think it’s just that they’d maybe say there would be x amount of apprentices across the project, and that’s measured on apprenticeship starts and completions.*

*But they wouldn't need to be employed by [company name], just as long as they are brought on somewhere."*

Mikaela, Case Study H Associate.

This claim is supported by comments made by Joe, a Case Study H company employee and union rep, who acknowledges that tender community benefit commitments around apprenticeships are seen as being the responsibility of smaller contractors.

*"Aye I mean as I've said, we just don't go for the monthly contracted employees. I think the, you know, community stuff in the bids is important, I want to see people being given a chance, but those opportunities might no come from us directly. We work with the subbies, a lot of these guys I've known a long time, we've all worked together, and if they can take on an extra body . . . the training, then if they sort out the apprentice it works for everyone."*

Joe, Worker and Trade Union Rep, Case Study H.

It could be argued that if apprentices are still being hired on the project, the nature of that engagement, and what company actually employs them, is perhaps not terribly significant. However, the interview with Mikaela, who has worked in apprenticeship engagement in the construction industry for years, helps to highlight the dangers that are attached to this employment structure, namely around the added potential for smaller contractors using substitution tactics.

*"It's really hard for me to say, but at a guess, just using my own experience, I don't know, maybe 70%, 80% of them, I do honestly think it's that high, they take on these apprentices and they don't know if there will be a job at the end . . . or sometimes yeah, they know there won't be one. I mean I can't tell you how many times I've seen a person come through, do an apprenticeship, all their work, the training, time at college, all going fine for 3 years and then they're expected to go through a full recruitment process for their own job. And the recruitment is*

*open, so anyone else can join and if they've more experience you've had it . . . and even that isn't worst case scenario. Sometimes the job is done and that's that, time to move on."*

Mikaela, Case Study H Associate.

Mikaela expands further, presenting her own analysis on what she believes motivates and drives this employer behaviour.

*"It's about commitment. Most of these companies, they don't know what's in store. COVID has proven that much. Who knows what work they'll have in 3 years, I think they almost hedge their bets. They take on the apprentice, it helps tick the boxes, it's an extra pair of hands, and if they've got the work when they're done, they'll maybe keep them on . . . and there's definitely benefits around succession planning, skills, you know. But if they don't need someone fully qualified when that person finishes, they get a clean break. If they need another apprentice for another job, it's easy enough to sort. The cycle can begin again . . . I think they weigh it all up and probably think it's worth it for them either way."*

Mikaela also points out that whilst these bids often include commitments around apprenticeships and training, there is no commitment around the number or percentage of staff on permanent secure contracts, or on how agency workers or subcontractors should be used. As previously stated, the trade union appears to have a relatively positive relationship with the company, with input into what subcontractors and agencies are used on projects, however Joe, the trade union representative, still had some criticisms to make relating to the points laid out by Mikaela.

*"The [procuring organisation] should be a bit more specific about looking at the community aspect and not just accepting everything being outsourced. The [procurement organisation] can place targets . . . I think there's a joint responsibility, to be honest with you . . . but yeah, the client has got a bigger role*

*to play in making sure of it, because if a client tells a main contractor, everybody on your project needs to be employed directly, there could be so many more apprentices. There is scope there. And the apprenticeship experience would probably be improved, in terms of just consistency even.”*

Joe, Worker and Trade Union Rep, Case Study H.

As ever, it is important to understand the perspective and experiences of apprentices. An interview outside the scope of the case studies with a young apprentice named Ronan was particularly relevant to the discussion around public work tenders, labour force fragmentation and apprenticeship substitution tactics. He previously worked for a small team of tradesmen, having completed a week-long work trial. This work took place on a public works project. At the end of his second week, when his wages were due to be paid, he was paid half of what he was promised, only to be told that the college he would be attending would pay the other half when he started his course, which was not due to begin for a further 5 months. This resulted in a dispute, and when Ronan found out that past apprentices had similar experiences with this company, and none to his knowledge had begun at college, he quit his new position, eventually finding a new apprenticeship, this time having a better experience working with his neighbour. Of the apprentices spoken to, Ronan's story was not reflective of the common apprenticeship experience. This story was particularly severe in terms of the extent of exploitation. However, it does serve as evidence of the outcomes this can lead to. A discussion with Raymond, a senior trade unionist in Scotland with vast experience, was also pertinent in terms of helping to better understand the impact of contractual obligations in tender contracts.

*“For me, as a trade unionist, trying to do right by my own members, yeah, you're going to want to see commitments around training, you know apprentices. We've supported that . . . when you get into some industries, construction is an obvious example, some of these guys are cut-throat. That's true of the big players though, not just the wee one-man bands . . . in my time, I've seen the way work is organised on these sites get totally broken down. The whole thing of one*

*developer or whatever buying the land, then hiring and getting it all sorted, that's done.*

*I think all my mates in the building game are self-employed now. It's been splintered off into a million wee bits and there's no putting that back together . . . I know some of these smaller mobs, you'll find some cowboys. Fly-by-nights. If you're asking do I think apprentices are vulnerable at that level to exploitation, then I'd say the answer is pretty obvious. But I wouldn't say it's all going back to bids and tenders and whatever. Maybe the way they're worded plays a part, it maybe allows some to bob and weave you know, get someone else to do what they should be doing. But at the end of the day, you're talking about something bigger. It all comes back to that bigger breakdown."*

Raymond, Trade Union Representative.

Raymond presents quite a balanced view, expressing strong support for the premise of including "social good clauses" within tender bids, whilst also acknowledging the broader structural changes in work in Scotland and linking this clearly to the dismissal of apprenticeship engagement. These broader structural forces he alludes to create the context for the decisions taken by dismissive employers to undertake an employment strategy that prioritises low cost and flexibility.

### Non-Engaged Employers: Conclusion

The analysis of gathered data, using the Fletcher 3-step approach (2016), again demonstrates that there are clear patterns of behaviour and characteristics related to each employer type within Bredgaard's typology. Evidence suggests that for passive employers, concerns over suitability tend to drive the organisational decision not to engage with apprenticeships. This can be tied to a potential lack of understanding of current apprenticeship frameworks, and/or to strongly held organisational values that drive decision making and dissuade engagement. With dismissive employers, these organisations tend to be discouraged from engaging

with apprenticeships because of the commitment that apprenticeships require, both in terms of training and in apprenticeship contracts. These commitments would contravene the broader strategy of the organisation to prioritise employer flexibility, and to look to lower labour costs and commitments as much as is possible. Like the engaged employer quadrants, these findings will be discussed and critically analysed in much greater depth within the *Discussion Chapter*.



## Chapter 7. Other Influences on Apprenticeship Engagement

### Introduction

The previous two chapters of this thesis have provided an overview of data relating to each employer type. The key themes that can be drawn from the evidence are then used to demonstrate the most significant factors that influence employer decision making in relation to apprenticeship engagement. Each employer type presents different approaches to apprenticeships that are characterised by different processes, motivations, and considerations. It is also the case however that some themes within gathered data either present similarly across all employer types, or appear inconsistently, and are not related to the employer typology framework used. This chapter presents the evidence relating to these key issues to provide a comprehensive overview of all key themes and considerations that impact apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in Scotland. This includes discussion of key policies and initiatives introduced by the UK and Scottish Governments respectively, demonstrating the impact these have had on employer decision making processes.

### Apprenticeship Levy

The Apprenticeship Levy is a hot button topic with employers, and it came as no surprise that this was discussed in depth within interviews for each case study. There were various specific points of discussion relating to the levy and its impact in Scotland, but there was a broad consensus around the levy that appeared to be unrelated to the prevailing attitude towards, or level of engagement with, apprenticeships. Within the case study interviews, the discussions typically began by assessing the participant's understanding of the levy. Participants tended to acknowledge that in the first year or two of the levy's operation, they struggled to truly grasp how it worked and where the money was going, however understanding improved and most HR staff, particularly those with a specific remit based around skills, training and/or recruitment, demonstrated a strong level of knowledge of

how this works in Scotland. Some more senior staff in director roles were less assured however in their explanations of the levy, whilst most middle managers and apprentices acknowledged that they had a limited understanding of it.

*“Yeah, it was a nightmare at the start . . . I just think people hate change sometimes, but it’s like everything else you come across in your work. You learn, you maybe factor it in a bit with other things and before long, you’re used to it.”*

Denula, HR Staff Member, Case Study F.

*“There was maybe confusion at first, but Skills Development Scotland have been really good at helping us navigate it all. And once you get through the explanations, how it works, then we’ve not had any issues.”*

Daly, HR Staff Member, Case Study G.

*“We got up to speed pretty quickly. I think once finance seen the money coming out, they wanted to know what we get back from it, so we make sure we do what we can on our end to make it worth our while.”*

Shannan, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

Despite the evidence demonstrating that employers in Scotland have developed understanding of the levy over time, there were still comments interspersed throughout many of the case studies that either explicitly or implicitly suggested that many employers fundamentally view and treat the levy largely as an additional tax-burden. This again was found within both engaged and non-engaged employers.

*“I wouldn’t say we put that much attention to it, to be honest. It’s another deduction, we just get on with it.”*

Joseph, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.

*“I think some do just see it as another form of tax.”*

Cameron, Management Level, Case Study C.

*“You do question sometimes you know, what is this actually for? Where does the money actually go? But I’ve probably wasted enough time asking these questions . . . You’re not going to change anything, it comes off and that’s that, it doesn’t change much else for us.”*

Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.

*“I do think that the first thought for some businesses when it came in was ok, this looks like more tax, more cost, more bother, how can we get around it?”*

Barry, Business Interests Group Representative.

These views were not expressed in every instance, but they were commonly held. If this was how so many viewed the levy, it would be important to ascertain how much influence the levy has on the decision-making process when employers consider engaging with apprenticeships. Data allows for some conclusions to be drawn, however there is nuance within the responses. There were participants within every single case study who were adamant when discussing the Apprenticeship Levy that this policy change has not been a significant factor in the apprenticeship engagement decision-making process. This was true of both engaged and non-engaged employers.

*“It doesn’t come into our thinking if I’m honest.”*

Mohammad, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.

*“No, the levy doesn’t change much really. We have our strategy . . . I don’t know that the levy enters the equation.”*

Magdalena, Management Level, Case Study G.

*“It has had zero impact.”*

Kathleen, Management Level, Case Study B.

*“I’ve never really heard it mentioned. It’s not like we have a recruitment meeting, and this suddenly pops up. And I’m not anti-levy or anything, it’s just not a factor.”*

Umar, HR Staff Member, Case Study J.

This position is generally the one held across all employer types. Those who engage argue that they would engage anyway, and that they do so for their own reasons, rather than being motivated to do so by the levy itself. Those who do not engage likewise suggest that they have reached this decision without being affected by the introduction of the levy. With all that in mind though, there is evidence within data that some engaged employers when discussing influences on their decision-making on occasion have referenced some aspects of the levy indirectly, suggesting that it does perhaps exert some influence on employer behaviour, even if this is not always understood or recognised. This is most prevalent within sceptical employers, particularly Case Study A, given the influence of rebadging on its strategy.

*“I know a bit about the levy, it’s gained more attention of late . . . but no, the levy hasn’t changed much for us.”*

Ross, Management Level, Case Study A.

*“I don’t know exactly how the funding works . . . I think it’s to do with the development fund or whatever it’s called. That helps us sort the training.”*

Bruno, Management Level, Case Study A.

Across the interviews relating to this organisation, there is some confusion over the levy and funding, especially given funding options are not restricted to apprenticeships in Scotland. However, the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (or at least the perception of what it can be used for), which is funded by the Apprenticeship Levy, significantly influences the company's decision to engage with apprenticeships. This is the case even as staff suggest that the levy is not a factor. This is the most obvious example across the case studies of the impact of the levy being misunderstood, however it is not the only example. Several HR staff interviewed within committed employer organisations noted that whilst their company had specific reasons for engaging with apprenticeships, being able to access funds for college provision allowed them to push back against any resistance met within meetings from those concerned about the finances. In such instances the levy may not be driving decision making, but it did help to facilitate engagement.

*“I’ve one guy in my head right now as I talk about this, and his thing is always the money. You probably need someone like that to be fair, making sure everything is above board . . . but it does mean that these decisions need to face up to a bit of scrutiny. You need to be able to justify the cost . . . so if we can draw down on funding available, if we can get people doing stuff . . . that gives them the skills, then it makes my job of selling this a wee bit easier.”*

Hayley, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

There are some employers that have suggested that the levy has the potential to negatively impact its level of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland, and this is true of both committed and sceptical employers. This claim is primarily made by employers who operate across both Scotland and England, meaning that they must navigate the separate systems of levy management that exist across these borders. When this is the case, the employers are more supportive of the English system of dispensing vouchers based on contributions, which is unsurprising given that this approach favours larger employers.

*“Oh yeah, the English system works better I think. You get more [back].”*

Javid, HR Staff, Case Study A.

*“Operating cross-border on all this is a pain, dealing with the different systems. You get a bit fed up. In England, it’s not perfect but at least you get access to your money back. I can see the logic to it. In Scotland, where does it all go? Cause we’re not seeing it.”*

Siobhan, Management Level, Case Study G.

Employer B was particularly unhappy with the perceived inflexibility of the Scottish system. An interview with Peter within this case study was particularly interesting, as he discussed how he wished to use the levy for a certain form of training he had arranged with a learning provider, having agreed the overall cost with an external company. Peter claims that when he attempted to arrange payment through the development fund, the cost being charged had more than doubled. Regardless of whether this claim is entirely accurate or not, this example, suggests that employers would like greater freedom with regards to how they can access and use the levy. This is a point corroborated by other data. The consensus among employers that operate across Scotland and England is that they prefer the English system, however when participants were asked towards the end of their interviews if a voucher system or financial incentive would encourage them to increase their company’s level of apprenticeship engagement, the answer was ultimately that it would not.

*“You know I don’t think so. Our strategy focuses on the longer-term, so I don’t think we’d be swayed much.”*

Kevin, Management Level, Case Study J.

*“I’d love to take on more apprentices, but the problem is our capacity, it’s not strictly financial, so it’s hard to see that changing.”*

Jimmy, Management Level, Case Study F.

*“In terms of workforce planning, I’m very keen for us to be strategic. There’s more to life than an immediate cash injection. There’s more to consider . . . so no, it’s not really something that would force a rethink or anything like that.”*

Thomas, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

Evidence suggests that the levy has had a very limited impact on the employer decision making process in relation to apprenticeships, though some sceptical employers may have been driven to engage in part by the levy to pursue funding. Other considerations are only indirectly related to the levy and appear to have minimal impact on decisions taken. Case study research also allowed for an evaluation of other relevant government interventions designed to boost apprenticeship engagement.

### *Apprenticeship Employer Grant*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government introduced two grant schemes to encourage employers to hire apprentices during a period of acute economic and social crises. Given that data was largely collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews with case study staff with a remit that includes recruitment and/or training, often involved discussion of these schemes. Only two employers claimed to have applied for the Apprenticeship Employer Grant, which involved a one-off payment being made to employers if they hired a new apprentice within a specific period during the pandemic. Of these two employers, they both depicted very different experiences. One organisation was relatively satisfied with the programme and was pleased to claim some funding back, which interview participants insisted was used to help cover the cost of hiring and training the apprentice.

*“It worked well, I think. In the grand scheme it’s not a huge amount of money but*

*it helps us to maybe give someone that opportunity so yeah, it's probably worthwhile."*

Umar, HR Staff Member, Case Study J.

*"Yeah, I think if employers were able to access some money like that as part of a longer term thing, then it makes sense to share the cost burden."*

Kevin, Management Level, Case Study J.

However the other employer, Case Study C, was much less enthusiastic about the programme, noting that the perceived over-bearing bureaucracy attached was not worth the money the organisation eventually received.

*"I wouldn't want to do it all again. It was a bit of a nightmare."*

Claire, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.

Whilst the experience of this fund differed, the impact that the fund being continued would have on each of these organisation's apprenticeship engagement however was strikingly similar.

*"No, I mean look, it was a bit of a pain, but grant or no grant, not much would change for us. We'll still do what we do."*

Claire, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.

*"Employers are crying out for more support . . . so I don't see why they wouldn't keep this scheme going, we would really benefit from that . . . I don't think we'd be able to bring more people on though, just because of the constraints we face in other areas. But a bit more support, I mean for the apprentices themselves, we can invest a bit more into them, it makes sense."*



Umar, HR Staff Member, Case Study J.

Of those who did not use the fund, some claimed not to have known enough about it to use it at the time, but there was broad support for extra funding being made available to employers. Despite this support, no employer explicitly stated that funding in this way would increase engagement levels. Engaged employers were broadly keen to use the scheme if it were to be continued, except for Case Study C, as staff were dissatisfied with the bureaucracy attached. No non-engaged organisation would be willing to reconsider its position if this scheme was extended and available to them.

### *Adopt an Apprentice*

The Adopt an Apprentice scheme was similar to the Apprenticeship Employer Grant in the sense that it also involved a payment being made to an employer on the basis that they hired an apprentice during a specified period during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, however for this scheme, the person being hired needed to be a former apprentice at another organisation who had been made redundant due to the economic downturn linked to coronavirus lockdowns. This scheme was made available for longer than the Apprenticeship Employer Grant during the pandemic, and more interview participants knew of the programme and understood what it entailed. Again, only two case study employers used this scheme, both committed employers, however others expressed a strong desire to do so, including sceptical employers. The aspect of this scheme that seemed most appealing to employers was not the financial incentive, though this certainly helped. The key attraction for employers was the prospect of being able to hire an apprentice who had already developed a level of skill, who had demonstrated that they had the right mindset to do a job and stick to it, and who was closer to attaining their qualifications.

*“This was a no brainer for us. A no brainer. You’re telling me I can bring someone in who’s two years in, they’re nearly done and just need a wee boost over the*

*finish line? No brainer . . . well I mean you know they must be half decent or they wouldn't have lasted in their last job for that long. One of the ones we got in, you could tell after 2 minutes of talking to the boy he's not daft. So if he wants to come and he's got a bit of experience, he's learned how to get it done, but there's still plenty room for us to mould him, get him into our ways of working, aye it's ideal . . . we took 3 in overall"*

Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.

*"No hire is without risk, that goes without saying. But this seriously limits our risk I think. That apprentice hasn't come to us straight from school, they've already shown they're capable and we get to reap the benefit of that, whilst helping them to make sure they don't fall through the cracks with all the lockdowns and stuff."*

Ross, Management Level, Case Study A.

*"The money with this was a bit of a bonus but we try to put that to good use to support [the apprentice]."*

Kathleen, HR Staff Member, Case Study B.

*"Yeah, we'd do this again in a heartbeat. It's went really smoothly . . . of course the lump sum has helped, nobody is going to turn that down . . . but yeah, the best part of this is the quality of apprentice."*

Javid, HR Staff Member, Case Study A.

This enthusiasm for being able to hire an experienced apprentice was also something that intrigued employers who had not used the scheme, but who expressed interest in doing so in future.

*"Well I mean we were in that recruitment freeze I mentioned for a bit, our*

*parent company were quite firm on it. So no, we obviously couldn't use it, but I did see it, one of our managers mentioned it actually now I think back . . . I think it would have been an easier sell on the factory floor if you are hiring an apprentice who wouldn't need their hand held so much. So yeah, if it comes back, yeah, we'd probably have a look at it."*

Hayley, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

*"We didn't do it, no but I quite like the idea. I feel for these young men and women, putting in all this work and then not getting their certificates and stuff. That isn't fair. So yeah, I'd consider it, you'd be getting someone who'd have a decent idea of what they're doing too you'd think, probably makes it all easier."*

Magdalena, Management Level, Case Study G.

Overall, there was broad support for the idea behind this scheme. The experience of the apprentice appealed to both committed and sceptical employers. It is likely that if the scheme was continued, organisations would engage with it on that basis. Interviews conducted with staff of non-engaged employers however demonstrated that this scheme would not encourage them to engage with apprenticeships. The perception that interview participants had of these schemes, and of the bureaucracy attached to apprenticeships, was often closely linked to how a person felt about the role of SDS in managing apprenticeships in Scotland, thus this too must be considered.

### Perception of Skills Development Scotland

Skills Development Scotland (SDS), as the Scottish Government skills body, is responsible for the management and organisation of apprenticeships in Scotland. Therefore, employer perception of SDS has the potential to impact the perception of, and engagement with, apprenticeships across Scotland. Like other themes discussed within this chapter, the employer perception of SDS does not appear to

correlate in any meaningful sense with employer types. For example, both non-engaging employers reported a positive view of SDS, which was also the view broadly held by most employers and interview participants, though there were also some criticisms. The key positive aspects of SDS, found repeatedly within the gathered data, spoke to the support and guidance employers have received, helping companies to navigate the apprenticeship landscape.

*“I’ve always found the staff there [at SDS] to be helpful.”*

Siobhan, Management Level, Case Study G.

*“Yeah, all been fine with SDS. Any issues or anything we’ve had, they’ve been great.”*

Umar, HR Staff Member, Case Study J.

*“I think they’ve gotten better at explaining it all, you know taking businesses through the various programmes and options. If you’re new to some of this it maybe isn’t easy, but I think SDS are doing a good job at supporting things.”*

Shannan, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

Some specific schemes involving SDS in Scotland have proved particularly popular, including Apprentice of the Year and Scottish Apprenticeship Week. Two interviews, both within committed employer case studies, suggested that the increased visibility given to apprenticeships because of these initiatives help to encourage employers to engage with apprenticeships.

*“I’ve no idea how long the whole apprenticeship week stuff has been going on, but it is growing every year now, how prominent it all is. It’s bigger news now I feel. And I think you know, people see that more, they learn a bit, and it does help.”*

Megan, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

*“The apprentice of the year, we’ve had a few people nominated for that. I think it gives apprenticeships a boost, it’s one thing I’d say is pretty good if I’m being fair.”*

Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.

Whilst most seemed to appreciate the role of SDS, and the majority of interactions discussed across the range of interviews depicted positive experiences, there were criticisms found within data relating to all employer types. This is an interesting point as it demonstrates that there are factors that engaged employers are likely demotivated by, yet they still choose to engage. The most frequent and notable of these criticisms related to the perceived burden of bureaucracy around apprenticeships, that some participants felt to be unnecessary, and for which they believed SDS to be responsible.

*“I mean the paperwork is a nightmare, I know I’ve said this before but the way things are done is so outdated. It takes up an inordinate amount of time . . . you’d need to ask SDS why they organise things the way they do.”*

Claire, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.

*“Things could be smoother. I don’t know, some things seem a bit pedantic to me. Things like needing a wet signature, like it’s 2021. Come on, some things need updated.”*

Kieran, Management Level, Case Study E.

Employers with a broadly positive view of SDS that engage with apprenticeships tend to note that the relationship with SDS helps the running of the apprenticeship programmes. This is a minor factor in ensuring that programmes are continued and renewed. Case study organisations that see increased thematic data criticising SDS

however note that the organisation is unlikely to reduce engagement levels because of the issues they raise, simply noting that small improvements would perhaps make some aspects of organising apprenticeships run slightly smoother.

### Practical Obstacles

The final theme drawn from the case study data relates to practical obstacles that organisations face that impact the level of apprenticeship engagement. Every single engaged employer suggested that practical obstacles limit the ability of the organisation to hire apprentices beyond a certain point. Within several interviews, HR staff members referred to this as the ‘apprenticeship glass ceiling’. This glass ceiling prevents the number of apprenticeships within an organisation increasing once engagement reaches a certain level, being curtailed by practical considerations such as a lack of physical space, lack of available mentors or trainers, a lack of work to be completed, or by financial limitations.

*“I would take on as many as we could fit through the door if I could, but there’s obviously a limit financially.”*

Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.

*“I mean you have to build your workforce planning around financial projections, how will things be looking for the company a few years down the line, that is what will determine what work needs done. And yeah, it’s the same for apprentices.”*

Thomas, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.

*“We would happily have more apprentices, definitely, it’s just there’s only so many shops.”*

Kevin, Management Level, Case Study J.

*“I know that I pick and choose a wee bit, who I ask to sort of keep an eye on apprentices, who to help them settle. It’s no really a job that suits everyone, so I’ve some bodies I reach out to, and I’d, I guess be a bit wary of stretching beyond that.”*

Daly, HR Staff Member, Case Study G.

Two specific examples that are worth highlighting relate to Case Study F and Case Study H. Case Study F serves as a good example here as the issues discussed within this case study are quite similar to limitations discussed within other case studies, and within interviews outside the scope of the case studies. The primary limitation Employer F faces is physical floor space, where apprentices operate. The layout of the floor is tightly designed, with limited room to manoeuvre if too many bodies are present. This means that only so many workers can be in there at any given time, which naturally limits the scope for apprentices. Additionally, the company has a mentor work closely with all apprentices, meaning that they too require physical space on the floor, meaning that when a new apprentice is hired, space must be considered for two employees and not just one.

*“You’d maybe have some companies, I dunno, wanting to just fire as many bodies in there as you can. But for us, we want to give them that guidance, somebody there to teach them and relay their own experience . . . so it’s quality over quantity.”*

Jimmy, Management Level, Case Study F.

For Case Study I, the issue is also space, however the nature of this problem is unique to this organisation and the industry in which it operates. For apprentices, they are required to do shift pattern work, often living together for periods at the workplace, sharing this space with other colleagues and apprentices. Case Study I is a strongly committed employer in relation to apprenticeship engagement, but it is the limited physical space within worker living space that prevents the organisation from expanding its current apprenticeship programme further, even

though it would like to, and even though it would benefit from doing so. This problem of living space within the context of shift work is specific to Case Study I within this project, however other employers report similar problems around space within their own contexts. What is clear within data is that when these practical obstacles arise, there is often little employers can do to extend their apprenticeship engagement.

*“It is one of they things, once you hit that sort of glass ceiling, there’s nowhere else for us to go. That’s us at capacity.”*

Stuart, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.

There is an interesting distinction that appears between employer types in relation to the perception of an apprenticeship glass ceiling. Committed and sceptical employers both engage with apprenticeships, however only committed employers engage to the point of the perceived apprenticeship ceiling. These organisations are positive about apprenticeships, they generally engage as part of a long-term strategy, but they all pinpoint a specific issue that halts their engagement from going past a certain point. Sceptical employers identify practical barriers, but data suggest that these organisations will engage with apprenticeships only to the point that they receive a tangible, and usually quickly felt, benefit for the organisation. Once the sceptical employer is satisfied that its needs are met by its level of apprenticeship engagement, it is unlikely to extend engagement beyond this point. Dismissive employers do not engage and show no desire to engage, though it is acknowledged that if compelled to, for example by tender bid agreements that were tightly monitored, the organisations would accept this and adjust quickly. Passive employers also do not engage, however they do not engage largely because it is perceived that the glass ceiling for them prevents engagement at any level, even though this may not always be the case. Understanding how an organisation perceives and relates to its apprenticeship glass ceiling is therefore of significant importance for understanding its approach to apprenticeships overall.



## Other Influences: Conclusion

Whilst previous chapters have demonstrated that there are behaviours and characteristics that are strongly linked to specific employer types, gathered data has also demonstrated that there are themes and issues that are unrelated to the categorisation of Bredgaard's typology. There is a consensus among employers that the Apprenticeship Levy has had no impact on the decision-making process when considering apprenticeship engagement, a claim that is generally supported in evidence. However, there are some instances in which the levy has likely directly or indirectly influenced discussions, though this is either very minimal or it relates to organisations opting to claim funding. Large employers with experience of the Scottish levy system and the English levy system tend to prefer the English system, as they can reclaim more funds back through that process, however the evidence suggests that even if these organisations were granted access to more money in this way, it would be unlikely to lead to an increase in engagement.

The same is also true of the financial incentives attached to the Apprenticeship Employer Grant and the Adopt an Apprentice Scheme, in that employers would naturally be happy to claim funds where they can, but this is unlikely to drive decision making. The factor most likely to actively encourage employers to engage with either of these schemes if they were to be extended further is in the opportunity to recruit a more experienced apprentice through the Adopt an Apprentice Scheme. It is also found that with employers reach a point whereby a practical barrier, relating to a factor such as lack of physical space, lack of work, lack of available mentors, or lack of finance, will create an apprenticeship glass ceiling which ultimately curtails the possibility of the organisation extending its level of apprenticeship engagement past that point. How the organisation relates to this glass ceiling is indicative of its approach to apprenticeships broadly.

The three most recent chapters have now outlined data gathered within this project. In doing so, the process of building practical knowledge to support policymakers and practitioners has begun, though further in-depth analysis is provided to build on these findings. The utility of Bredgaard's (2017) framework

has also been demonstrated, which was another key aim of the project. It is important to acknowledge however, that data gathered has highlighted a weakness within Bredgaard's framework. It has proven very useful for categorising employers, which has allowed key characteristics to be understood. However, the typology captures a static view of engagement, whilst the evidence has clearly demonstrated that apprenticeship engagement is not a static endeavour. Indeed, employer attitudes and participation can change, as has been shown. It is important to both recognise the scope for change, and to be able to develop the framework so that such change can be better understood. If knowledge is to be developed to support those attempting to drive positive change in apprenticeship engagement by encouraging an increase in the opportunities provided to the people of Scotland, then it is crucial to use a framework which can capture instances of change and allow the structural forces and causal mechanisms stirring such movement to be revealed.

## Chapter 8. Developing Bredgaard's Typology: Employer Movement

### Introduction

Previous chapters have demonstrated the utility of Bredgaard's framework. Data for each case study has been gathered and analysed, and each employer has been accurately placed within the typology. This categorisation has been followed by subsequent chapters that have identified and explained the key characteristics and motivations of each employer type. However, data also demonstrate a shortcoming in using this typology to provide a simple snapshot in time analysis of engagement, as evidence shows that engagement is not a static phenomenon. Rather, employers may change their attitude or engagement with apprenticeships over time. This is supported by research conducted by the IFF (2020 & 2021) that shows that employers can be motivated by a range of factors to move from non-engagement to engagement, and from engagement to non-engagement.

This is particularly significant given that a stated aim of the research is to provide knowledge and support to practitioners and policymakers in their quest to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunity available to people in Scotland, which requires employer change and movement. Therefore, any framework tool being used to evaluate apprenticeship engagement should be able to capture changes in employer attitude and behaviour. This allows for movement across the employer quadrants to be recognised and tracked, and more importantly, enables researchers to critically assess what forces, structures and motivations have compelled this change in behaviour.

This chapter therefore presents evidence from two case studies, Employer A and Employer D, showing that data establish not just where these organisations are currently placed within the framework, but that these organisations have only moved to their respective positions relatively recently, having previously both been dismissive employers. The change in both instances is tracked and explained. A change to Bredgaard's model is then proposed to enable changing employer behaviour to be captured within the framework.

## Case Study A

Employer A is a large employer in the energy industry in Scotland. The primary recruitment of the company is for multi-utilities workers, meaning that these staff members need to be trained and qualified in multiple trades to complete the tasks their jobs require of them. Whilst apprenticeships are quite common within the industry, Employer A's recruitment needs are unique. Management within the company felt that available apprenticeship frameworks would not provide their workers with a comprehensive enough background in all technical aspects of the job. Interview data demonstrate very clearly that at this stage, a prevailing negative view of apprenticeships was evident within the organisation and the company did not engage with apprenticeships.

*“We didn't [engage] for a long time, from before I started even. I think people just felt it wasn't the right fit, nobody was really too keen on going down that road . . . we would try and hire for experience.”*

Javid, HR Staff Member, Case Study A.

*“I mean even when we did sort of start getting the ball rolling, and it kinda looked like yeah, we're going to make this an apprenticeship scheme, there was the odd grumble . . . there was a bit of a negative perception that maybe lingered.”*

Bruno, Management Level, Case Study A.

The company soon came to acknowledge however that there was a growing need to develop talent and skills in-house, partly in response to replace outgoing workers, and partly to enable expansion. Bruno was placed in charge of designing and managing a new training programme, intended to ensure that new workers could be taught the technical aspects of the job, mixing this with real life experience and being instilled with organisational values in this process. Whilst

there are obvious similarities with what is being described and apprenticeships, it was not originally envisioned in this way, and new starts were hired as trainees, rather than as apprentices.

*“No, it wasn’t designed that way [for apprentices], it was all about getting trainees in and getting them ready for what you need to be doing here. I hadn’t really considered the apprenticeship angle back then if I’m honest.”*

Bruno, Management Level, Case Study A.

The training programme ran in this way for a period. An intervention from the HR department then forced a rethink, as the decision was taken to change the training programme to an apprenticeship programme to enable the organisation to take advantage of some funding opportunities associated with apprenticeships. Bruno explained this also:

*“The training programme we initially designed we wouldn’t class as an apprenticeship, but now we’ve put it through as an apprenticeship now so we can get funding from Skills Development Scotland. What we’ve had to do is we’ve enrolled the guys on an NVQ in [the trade] and we’ve done this through [an external company] . . . Now because they are doing that as part of the overall 4-year course that I’ve designed, then we can class it as an apprenticeship. I suppose if we were to really dumb it down, I would still just call it a trainee programme to be honest.”*

In an instance such as this, where existing jobs have been changed to become apprenticeships, it is necessary to reflect on what has really changed. If the job and training remained exactly as is, does the changing of a programme name from being a traineeship to an apprenticeship make a noticeable difference? Firstly, this project seeks to better understand apprenticeship engagement, and regardless of the motivation behind it, this still represents movement from non-engagement to engagement. Secondly, there was some discussion within the interviews that implied slight change was occurring in the approach taken by the company.

*“Not a lot, but it’s maybe slightly more structured now, there’s a bit more balance, the different elements don’t get shifted about as much. If you’re working with people outside the company, they’ve set plans for their side of it, then yeah, you need to set a plan and stick to it too.”*

Ross, Management Level, Case Study A.

It is also possible that by engaging with apprenticeships, the prevailing negative attitude found within the organisation may shift over time. This further highlights the importance of considering employer movement. What is seen with this case study is movement occurring within the typology, as Employer A has changed from not engaging with apprenticeships to engaging with apprenticeships, whilst the prevailing attitude to apprenticeships has remained the same as it was previously.

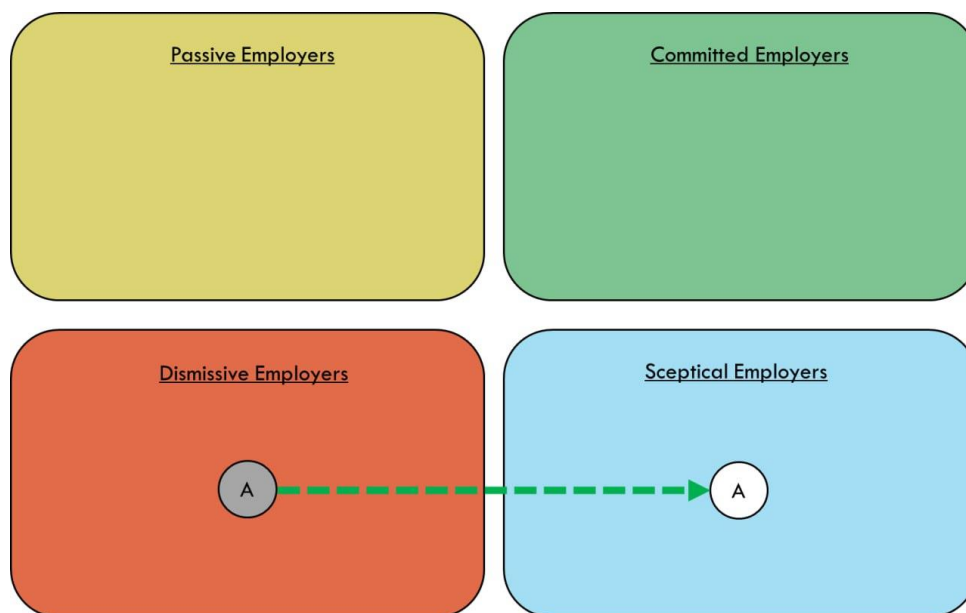


Figure 27. Employer A Movement.

### Case Study D

Case Study D is a large employer in Scotland that operates in the drinks industry,

employing people across Scotland at distilleries and centres in the central belt, as well in various locations across the rural highlands. The primary recruitment needs of the organisation relate to roles within the distilleries, however there are other roles the company is finding itself having to hire for in reasonably high numbers. Interview data demonstrate that the organisation engages with apprenticeships and presents a positive prevailing attitude towards them. Data also however make it clear that this was not always the case, and that only around between two and three years before the case study research was conducted, the company did not engage with apprenticeships and that there was a deeply negative prevailing attitude towards apprenticeships. The primary reason for this was that the company previously had a series of bad experiences with low-standard apprentices, which negatively impacted how apprenticeships were viewed and dissuaded engagement.

*“There was an issue there, sort of historically, almost like it lingered for a while. There were some bad hires, some issues, a bit of drama. I’ve never asked about it in too much depth but the gist of it is that it was all a bit of a disaster, and that got people’s backs up. And they decided no, you know, this isn’t working.”*

Hayley, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

This seemed to dictate organisational thinking for several years, however the company was forced to rethink its strategy because of a high number of workers approaching retirement who would need to be replaced.

*“Yeah, once the pandemic hit in particular, for that year or whatever, it felt like somebody was leaving every week. And it was all people who’d been here for 30, 40 years. At the start they would send an email round, thanking such and such, offering best wishes on their retirement or whatever they were doing, but they honestly had to stop at a certain point. It was getting depressing, it felt like everyone was leaving.”*

Hayley, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

Whilst staff within the organisation were previously hesitant about engaging with apprenticeships because of past difficulties with apprentices, data also demonstrate that this was linked to concerns over younger workers generally. As it became apparent that the organisation would need to proactively seek to develop required skills in-house, discussions took place amongst HR staff about how the right type of young person could be recruited, and more importantly, how an apprenticeship programme could be deliberately shaped to ensure the apprentice developed the behaviours expected of an employee. A significant degree of focus was then placed on instilling organisational values and ways of working. This was noted in several interviews, including with Hamza, a current apprentice, who implicitly touches upon the behavioural aspects of the grounding afforded by his apprenticeship.

*“I learn a lot from [his supervisor]. I need to study obviously, I am working my way through my [course] at the moment . . . that’s a big part of it though, just like learning to work almost. Doing what you’re supposed to be doing. Sometimes it’s the wee things, and how you maybe speak to someone, and even how I shop up, trying to be professional . . . it maybe sounds a bit, I don’t know, but it’s all knew when you are just in the door. You want to do it the right way, and that’s what they want too . . . It makes me feel like I’m becoming part of the team I think.”*

Hamza, Apprentice, Case Study D.

The challenge posed by forced generational change, combined with a few new recruits into the HR department with fresh, progressive ideas, unaffected by past issues, who advocated internally on behalf of apprenticeships, led to change occurring. The company began to engage and the experiences this time were overwhelmingly positive, which had the effect of changing the long-held negative prevailing attitude towards apprenticeships.

*“When people have a fixed idea for a long time, it’s going to be hard to change that, but you’re only shot is having them see things first hand, for themselves.*



*And when the floor managers or the older distillers or whoever see these young apprentices in early, ready to work, picking things up, you know growing as people. The fact they really seem to want to be here is massive too . . . you take all of that together and yeah, people start to think a bit differently about it.”*

Megan, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.

Not only has Employer D seen a change in attitude and engagement, but its level of apprenticeship engagement is very high for the size of organisation and workforce it has. The change within a short period of time has been dramatic, and that is reflected below within the typology.

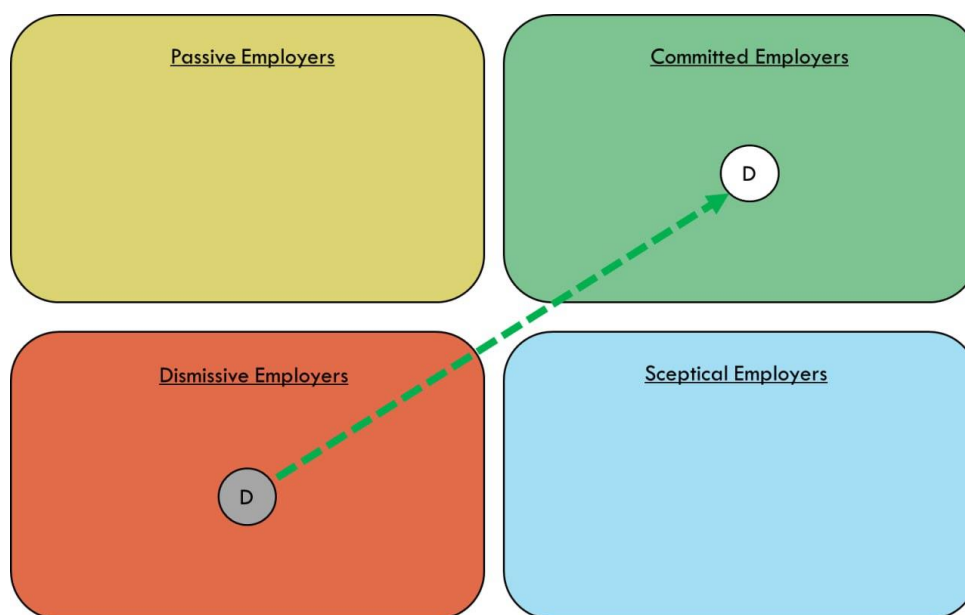


Figure 28. Employer D Movement.

It is interesting to note that in both the case of Employer D and Employer A, the companies had a set way of thinking and strategy of non-engagement, before a change in circumstance helped to provoke change. Further analysis of this process is available within the *Discussion Chapter*, however the evidence that this has occurred in these instances suggests that other dismissive employers could theoretically undertake a similar process of change. If the aim of practitioners and

policymakers is to encourage change, then it is essential to understand this process and to develop a framework that can capture it.

### Developing Bredgaard's Typology

Previous chapters have demonstrated the utility of Bredgaard's typology, whilst this chapter has presented evidence to show that there is value in the typology as it exists, however it could be improved by including scope to track a change in employer behaviour within the framework. The proposal to develop the typology itself is very simple: to include previous placement within the framework for employers as well as current placement, and to track the change that occurred. This is illustrated below.

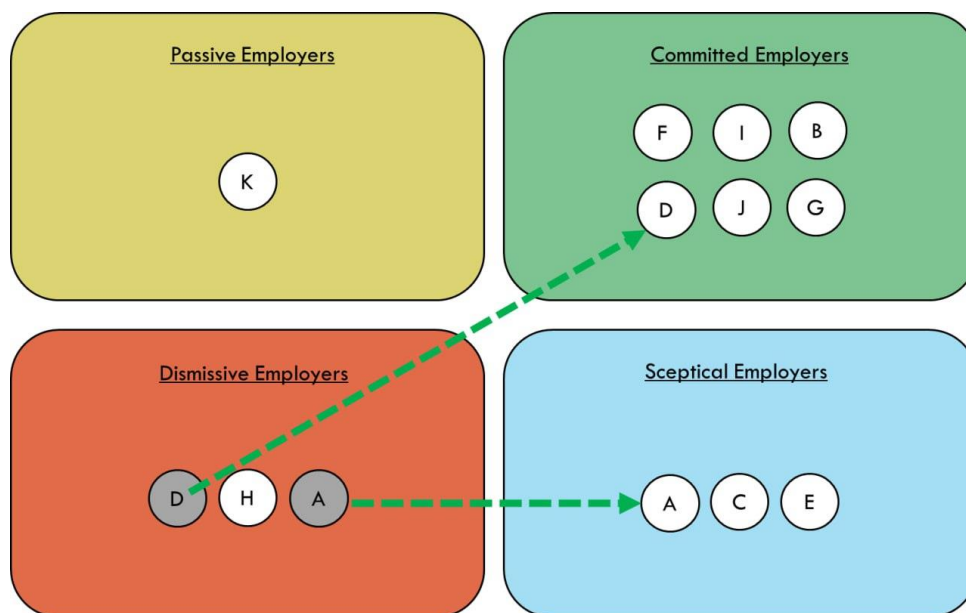


Figure 29. Developed Typology Placement.

In addition to this though, it is important to note that this research project did not set out to discover the past attitude or engagement level of employers. In these two instances, such information came about because of information revealed by interview participants and documentary analysis within case studies. This is a

particular benefit of conducting qualitative interviews, as this approach allows for discussions that are unexpected that can lead to unexpected discoveries, as it did in this instance. In future however, researchers with a specific interest in supporting an increase in engagement, either around apprenticeships or other policies, schemes, or initiatives, would benefit from designing the research in a way that seeks to understand an employer's attitude and engagement, both past and present. This would naturally involve structuring interviews around questions relating to attitudes and engagement in the past, present, and future. Knowledge that can be developed of both past and present behaviour, and of what motivates change in engagement and attitudes, could have profound implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve employment opportunities for people. Using this updated version of Bredgaard's typology would aid researchers in this quest.

## Chapter 9. Discussion: Analysis of Employer Profiles of Behaviour

### Introduction

Having completed the first process of data analysis, employers were placed within Bredgaard's typology, demonstrating the utility of the framework. Data was then analysed in relation to each specific employer type to identify the key themes and influences on the decision-making process for each quadrant of the framework. The analysis so far has therefore primarily consisted of the first stage of Fletcher's 3-step process, whereby demi-regularities have been sought and identified within data using flexible deductivism. The thematic list was used to identify themes that were anticipated to be found following the literature review, though new themes were also identified as being relevant and were explained and discussed.

This chapter builds on the knowledge gleaned so far. The key demi-regularities for each employer type are discussed once more, but with a more in-depth analysis by using stages two and three of Fletcher's approach, abduction and retroduction. Abduction is the process of theoretical redescription of the demi regularities found, and abduction then involves revealing the deeper causal mechanisms and structures that drives the observable phenomena. This chapter is structured to provide thorough analysis of each demi-regularity identified within data and to demonstrate the causes and structures that drive employer behaviour and apprenticeship engagement for each employer type. This has allowed for an employer profile to be built for each quadrant of the framework, showing the structural forces, causal mechanisms and compelling motivating factors that drive the behaviours and decision-making processes of each type of employer. A thorough analysis is also presented on the themes derived from data which applied beyond just one employer type.

### Committed Employers

Data gathered in relation to committed employers demonstrate that there are

three broad themes that are most prominent in explaining how these organisations engage with apprenticeships in Scotland. The first of which is workforce investment, and this has subthemes attached around plugging skills gaps and creating talent pipelines. The second relates to generational change, which covers concerns over losing and replacing existing staff, as well as the negative perceptions commonly held about the new generation of young people entering the workforce. The third and final demi-regularity for committed employers is the use of apprenticeship engagement as a form of organisational altruism, as some employers seek to give back to communities by providing employment and training opportunities in the form of apprenticeships.

These themes overlap and contradict with each other at times. There is a clear link between an organisation opting to invest in its workforce and generational change that occurs within the workforce. In every single committed employer case study, participants to some degree mentioned the need to invest in the workforce and how apprenticeships are used as a means of giving back to communities. However, there is a clear split between organisations that are primarily driven by a desire to invest in and develop the workforce, and organisations that are primarily driven by an ostensible sense of altruism. This creates different profiles of behaviour even within the same employer type, as altruistic committed employers and workforce development committed employers are driven to engage for different reasons. These organisations therefore view and manage apprenticeships in different ways. The upcoming subsections will be used to explain the theory behind organisational decision making and the causal mechanisms and structures that drive those decisions.

### *Human Capital Theory and Labour Market Pressures*

Data gathered show that many committed employers engage with apprenticeships primarily as part of an organisational strategy to invest in and develop the workforce. This includes the intention to acquire or develop talent to plug current or future skills gaps, to manage succession planning and create a talent pipeline

within the organisation. What this all fundamentally amounts to is an organisational adherence to human capital theory (HCT) (Schultz, 1961), regardless of whether it is framed around developing and retaining skills or developing and retaining people. Fundamental to HCT is the principle that the workforce is an asset like other fixed assets a company may own, and that investing in the development of that asset, in the form of training, mentoring or education, will increase the asset value and improve outputs for the organisation (Nafukho, Hairston & Brooks, 2004). This is the principle that we see at the heart of the apprenticeship engagement of some committed employers.

We also see the relevance of Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on the novice to expert journey of apprentices in communities of practice within committed employer case study data. Several interviews with staff within these organisations noted the need not just to teach apprentices the technical skills required to do the job, but also to allow them to learn from people within the organisation about the working culture and what is expected of staff within that environment. When discussing the role of apprenticeships within the organisation, some interview participants explicitly discussed creating new experts in the field, whilst others more implicitly touched upon this theme by discussing the need to develop apprentices to the point that they could assume senior positions within the organisation. This is linked within some interviews to the need to develop new wisdom capital (Vasconcelos, 2017) to replace the knowledge and experience of older outgoing staff.

It is also apparent within data that the drive to create experts and develop high level skill sets links into apprenticeship programmes in these organisations that would be deemed expansive within Fuller and Unwin's (2004) continuum, going beyond the scope of ordinary training programmes and providing a rounded learning journey for apprentices within these development-driven organisations. This is seen for example with how skill development is valued by the development focused committed employers, and with how apprentices are gradually transitioned to full, rounded participation. There is a clear vision and path for career progression for these apprentices, who have access to multiple communities

of practice for example by working across departments and locations, engaging with other apprentices and trade unions. This in some ways resonates with the work of Brockmann and Smith (2023) who have linked the conceptualisation of an apprenticeship with how it is experienced and what drives engagement. Similarly to what they found within their case studies, committed employers that view apprenticeships as a vehicle for the development of new experts in industry have developed strong relationships with other stakeholders, such as unions and learning providers, and proactively seek to retain apprentices once they have qualified.

The notion that some organisations are driven to engage with apprenticeships as a means of skill development corroborates previous research on apprenticeship engagement, with a range of studies demonstrating, to differing degrees, that the development of human capital significantly impacts employer decision making around apprenticeships (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018; Gambin & Hogarth, 2017; Mieschbuehler, Neary & Hooley, 2015; Chankseliani and Anuar, 2019). Under the umbrella of HCT are the specific desires of committed employers to manage skills gaps and to create a succession plan by moulding a pipeline of talent throughout the organisation. A survey conducted by SDS (2020) demonstrated that 86% of engaged Scottish employers were motivated to recruit and train apprentices as a means of upskilling staff, 77% suggested apprenticeships would bring new knowledge and skills into the organisation, and 71% opted to use apprenticeships over alternative forms of training or recruitment specifically as a tool to develop succession planning pipelines. An IFF (2021) survey conducted in Scotland demonstrated that of employers that had started engaging with apprenticeships over the last three years, 58% were motivated to do so as a means of acquiring talent, and 17% done so to nurture talent within the organisation, and these findings are broadly replicated across the UK (IFF 2020 & 2022).

The criticism of the approaches taken by these surveys is that whilst the methodological approach allowed for this issue to be identified as a key theme for employers, there was little to no understanding of exactly how significant a role HCT plays in driving employer decision making and behaviour. The evidence gathered as part of this project, focusing on a smaller number of organisations but

gathering richer data, has allowed for a deeper understanding to be reached. Data demonstrate unequivocally that for many committed engaged employers, the choice to hire and train apprentices is primarily driven by the desire to recruit and nurture talent, underpinned by an organisational adherence to the principles of HCT. However, it is also the case that some employers are happy to proclaim that workforce development is a driving factor, when a thorough analysis demonstrates that it is a peripheral concern at best. This is shown with committed employers primarily driven by ostensibly altruistic concerns.

Given that we now know that HCT helps to significantly shape the theoretical basis of apprenticeship engagement amongst some committed employers, it is essential to understand what structural forces and causal mechanisms create the context for this theory to be put into practice. It is evidently the case that some employers will require skilled workers to help complete tasks, produce outputs and within private companies, create profit. This need is shaped by the neoliberal capitalist structuring of our society, however the decision to meet that need by engaging with apprenticeships is a choice. By analysing data, and the specific reasons given by employers for engaging, we can delve into the real structural forces that most significantly encourage apprenticeship engagement as an extension of HCT.

The interview conducted with Cascia, a business interests group representative, best captured the key structural pressures employers are facing in the labour market. As is outlined within the *Engaged Employers Chapter*, Cascia noted the squeeze put on the Scottish labour market by COVID-19, Brexit, an increase in economic inactivity and Scotland's ageing population. Data demonstrate that of these issues, the primary concern relating to committed employers and HCT is Scotland's ageing population, though this is also impacted by the other issues. As is noted within the *Introduction Chapter*, Scotland's population and workforce is ageing at an alarming rate. By 2045, the percentage of Scottish residents aged 65 or over is predicted to grow by nearly 30% (CIPD, 2022b). That poses medium-long term concerns for the state; however, employers note problems arising from this already. Interviews with Megan and Gemma, both HR staff members within Case Study D, demonstrate the impact of this, with a large proportion of staff



approaching retirement and leaving work, to the point that some employers are struggling to cope with the pace of change. Here we see growing concerns over the potential loss of 'wisdom capital' as discussed by Vasconcelos (2017).

Whilst employers attempt to manage one generation's exiting of the labour market, there is also a need to smooth the transition of the young generation entering the workplace, and this has also proven challenging for some. A negative perception of young workers persists, however for committed employers, this acts to encourage apprenticeship engagement, as hiring young apprentices allows employers to instil ways of working and organisational values early. Many case study interview participants used the phrase 'blank canvas' to describe this strategy, which echoes Nagano's (2014) depiction of the 'white cloth' strategy to explain this motivation for specifically hiring young people. Case Study D provides a clear example of this, as the company had refused to engage with apprenticeships until it felt the force of this structural, societal change, in being affected by the ageing workforce, and by concerns about the prospect of hiring young people because of the perceived different values of the latest generation. These combined to force the organisation to adapt its strategy. It is clear then that generational change is a significant structural force in driving apprenticeship engagement among committed employers.

The other external forces bearing down on the labour market outlined by Cascia - COVID-19, Brexit and rising economic inactivity - serve to exacerbate and accelerate this broader problem. Many interviewees note that the pandemic seemed to contribute to a rise in worker's seeking early retirement, whilst an inability to employ European migrant workers and additional challenges in tempting young people into work over going to university also contribute to mounting difficulties. The other serious problem facing employers looking to recruit is the skills gap, which data show is a major concern for committed employers. Interviews within case studies demonstrate that whilst skill needs within organisations could previously be filled by hiring experienced workers, this option is no longer as readily available because of growing skills gaps within broad sectors. This has in turn helped to encourage employers to develop the skills

needed internally through apprenticeship programmes. It is clear from the evidence gathered that these labour market pressures are combining to impact organisational decision making.

### *Apprenticeships as Altruism*

Data for committed employers demonstrate a clear split, as whilst all case studies included at least some mention of engaging with apprenticeships as a means of investing in the workforce and as a way to give back to local communities, analysis has demonstrated that these organisations were either *primarily* motivated by one or the other of these key themes. The idea of apprenticeships as a tool to provide opportunity is one that drives the engagement of some committed employers and shapes the way in which these organisations view the apprentice-employer relationship. This altruistic framing of apprenticeships ultimately speaks to a sense of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which is the belief that employers and private companies have a responsibility that extends beyond simply generating profit, acknowledging that there is a shared value in working to benefit the community and society in which the organisation operates (Porter & Kramer, 2011). This principle is evident within data gathered for committed employers, with many interviewees explicitly framing the role of their organisation using strikingly similar language.

Within the literature there is considerable evidence that CSR plays a significant role in driving apprenticeship engagement. Three reports conducted on employer motivations for engaging with apprenticeships in Scotland all demonstrated that altruism was noted as an influencing factor by a significant number of respondents (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2021; FSB, 2018). Further evidence suggests that altruism is a significant influencing factor in encouraging apprenticeship engagement across the rest of the UK (IFF 2020 & 2022), and research shows that it influences employers in other parts of the world, even including Norway where apprenticeships are much more deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of the society (Rusten, Grimsrud & Eriksen, 2020). What is found within committed employers

very strongly resonates with Simms' (2017) findings on what drives employers to hire young people, with her work highlighting that organisations are generally persuaded by either an HR argument, or by a CSR argument. This is broadly what is found with committed employers and apprenticeships, however data for this project suggest one typically has much greater significance than the other.

The case study data gathered show that often when an employer is primarily motivated by a sense of CSR, the organisation casts itself in the role of the benevolent altruist, and the apprentice is understood as a fortunate beneficiary of corporate kindness, rather than the relationship being understood as a mutually beneficial economic arrangement. This is a key difference between workforce investment driven committed employers and ostensibly altruistically driven employers, and the result is that apprentice conditions tend to be superior in the investment driven organisations. Altruistically driven companies often report more significant concerns around retaining apprentices and take any defections more personally when they occur. The fear of poaching as discussed by Kaprawi et al (2021) is more prevalent within these organisations. Interviews with apprentices, both within and without case study employers, suggested that it was not the offers of predatory competitors that had the biggest impact in making apprentices leave their employers once they had gained qualifications, but the working conditions of the company itself. This is a result of the breakdown of the understanding of the employment relationship, as these employers tend to think because they are doing the apprentice a favour, the apprentice's loyalty should be guaranteed, regardless of pay or conditions. The apprentices however understand the arrangement as a standard employer-employee bargain, and if they do not feel they are sufficiently remunerated or supported, often they will look to move on.

This is important as some interviews with altruistically driven employers suggested that if apprentices continued to leave or be poached, the organisation could be forced to consider discontinuing engagement. This then has the potential to turn into a vicious cycle. If fewer organisations train and develop apprentices, it will create a tougher market for skills. This has the potential to increase the likelihood of poaching, and subsequently increase the likelihood that other employers will

react in the same way, by pulling back from hiring and training apprentices. Practitioners and policymakers are keen to increase apprenticeship engagement, and understandably the focus of those efforts will primarily be on encouraging employers to take on more apprentices. However, the evidence of altruistically driven committed employers suggests that there would be a benefit in working with organisations displaying these characteristics to attempt to change perspectives on the employment relationship. This has the potential to help drive an improvement in apprentice conditions, aid retention rates, and to ensure that these employers do not withdraw engagement.

Even with the utility of these findings for skills practitioners and policymakers, it is important to delve further. CSR is a significant factor in driving the apprenticeship engagement of some committed employers, however, to undertake a process of retrodution of this phenomenon, it is necessary to peel back the layers to understand and reveal what the intentions of employers may be. Truly gleaning insight into the layered motivations of employers is naturally challenging, however some interviews conducted within the committed employer case studies provide some insight. When discussing the moral argument for organisations behaving in an ethical way, often participants would also acknowledge, explicitly or implicitly, that being seen to behave in an ethical way is beneficial to the organisation. It is also worth noting that of the committed employers primarily driven to engage with apprenticeships by an adherence to ideas of CSR, all were private companies. It is fair to presume then, that in some instances, simple capitalistic self-interest will drive ostensibly altruistic engagement, and it is the public perception that drives behaviour. Hur, Kim and Woo (2013) have demonstrated that CSR is likely to have a positive effect on corporate brand credibility and reputation, and interviews show that employers operate with this in mind.

Whilst that is undoubtedly a cynical conclusion to draw, there are other possible driving forces beneath the surface of ostensibly altruistic apprenticeship engagement. The first of which is that some employers will likely be acting in good faith, genuinely motivated by a desire to create a public good by offering employment and training opportunities. In which case, either a strong

organisational ethos, or individual agency, are likely to be the primary mechanisms driving behaviour. The final alternative is that the company has strategised based on its own narrow interests in pursuit of profit, but that decision has then been reframed by staff, who come to genuinely believe that the primary motivation was purely altruistic.

Where this work builds on previous research is in being able to provide a more thorough analysis of the extent to which ostensible altruistic motives drive behaviour, and the impact that this motivation has upon the apprenticeship. The findings tell us that this can either be a primary motivation or a peripheral motivation. Organisations are generally keen to proclaim that they are significantly driven by charitable ideals, but often there are more important factors at play. We see this in the example of the committed development-centric organisations already discussed. There are however organisations that are primarily driven to engage by either a sense of altruism, or the desire to be perceived as such. When this is the case, evidence shows that this often impacts the nature of the apprenticeship itself.

### Sceptical Employers

Data gathered relating to sceptical employers suggest a more divergent range of thematic influences on apprenticeship engagement than is found with committed employers, however there are three key themes that require further analysis: industry expectations, financial considerations and the use of apprenticeships to address short-term recruitment needs. Of these themes, none apply to all sceptical employers universally, however there is evidence of each of them in more than one instance. There is also no discernible relationship between these themes, thus they must be understood and analysed on their own terms. Rather than producing two clear split profiles of behaviour, as is found within committed employers, different combinations of these themes characterise the apprenticeship engagement of sceptical employers. Given that this type of employer chooses to engage with apprenticeships despite displaying a negative prevailing attitude about them, it is

perhaps understandable that employer behaviour is less consistent than that of committed employers.

### *Apprenticeships as the 'Done Thing': Mimetic Isomorphism*

A common theme found within case study data for sceptical employers is the notion that some of these organisations engage with apprenticeships partly because they understand apprenticeships as 'the done thing' within the industry. There is a prevailing belief within some of these organisations that there is an implicit expectation held by external stakeholders, such as industry competitors and governing bodies, that apprentices should be hired and trained as a matter of course. These sceptical employers impacted by this then engage with apprenticeships by following the recruitment and training patterns that are the norm in the field. Fundamentally, these organisations are mimicking the processes, value systems and mannerisms of competitors, or other organisations operating within a similar environment. This meets the definition laid out in the *Literature Review Chapter* of mimetic isomorphism, and we find strong evidence of conformity through imitation (Haveman, 1993). Understanding the process through a conceptual lens allows for a deeper analysis to occur.

Case Study E provides rich data demonstrating the role that mimetic isomorphism plays in organisational decision making. We see participants acknowledging that the company engages with apprenticeships, having done so for a long time, in part because other similar organisations engage as well. These participants understand the phenomena that they can observe on the surface but seem to have little understanding of the underlying drivers. Although less definitive than Case Study E, Case Study C also presents similar themes. This can then be compared with the literature, where there is evidence to be found of isomorphism driving apprenticeship engagement. For example, Chankseliani and Anuar (2019) showed that 41% of German employers engage with apprenticeships because it is something they have always done, which is an incredibly high figure, though it is important to understand that the context is different in Germany, where apprenticeships are

much more deeply embedded into the economy (Walden & Troeltsch, 2013) and apprenticeship outcomes are much stronger than found across the UK (Ryan & Unwin, 2001).

Within the Scottish context, the FSB report (2018) showed that 10% of small businesses that have engaged with apprenticeships opted to do so because it is commonplace in the sector. Mimetic isomorphism is a difficult concept to quantify though, given that the process is often not a conscious one, as is demonstrated by Case Study E interview data. Respondents within this case study are repeatedly critical of the management and delivery of apprenticeships, yet do not, and have not, considered the possibility of withdrawing from engagement. There is a clear sense that apprenticeships are a permanent fixture, almost an immutable fact of life within the company and within the sector. The participants do not explicitly proclaim that they engage to copy other organisations, but that sense of expectation appears to drive the continued engagement.

The abduction process reveals the role of mimetic isomorphism in compelling this behaviour as these companies seek legitimacy. The next layer to consider as part of the retroductive analysis, requires one to consider why these organisations crave legitimacy at all. Firstly, legitimacy is crucial to an organisation being accepted within the environment in which it operates (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Beyond that though, society perceives the legitimate organisation to have a greater value and to be more trustworthy, which garners a degree of social capital that solidifies an organisation (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is achieved through meeting the expectations set by society in its economic and social actions, however if these expectations are not met, the organisation may be sanctioned by society (Burlea- Schiopoiu, & Popa, 2013). Legitimacy theory therefore dictates that organisational legitimacy is not simply deemed to be a benefit to the organisation, but essential.

Taking this into account, the decision to engage with apprenticeships in the belief that apprenticeships are 'the done thing' and that a form of industrial pressure exists is not a result of indifference. Di Maggio and Powell (1983) depict this

behaviour as being shaped by cultural pressures within industries that are so strong that they supplant the desires of single organisations. This explanation makes sense of some interview data that initially appeared odd, as it demonstrates that some sceptical employers are not moved to engage with apprenticeships out of inertia or indifference, but by sweeping unseen forces in the form of industrial pressure that demands conformity for legitimacy, and thus continued success, to be achieved.

### *Financial Considerations*

Another notable theme found within the sceptical employer data relates to financial considerations, including the funding that is available for apprenticeships. Case Study A provides the clearest example of this, with interview participants explicitly acknowledging that the organisation would rather run a trainee programme, as opposed to an apprenticeship programme, but it opts to engage with apprenticeships because it believes this allows funding to be claimed from state bodies. A participant interviewed as part of Case Study C hinted at similar motivations but was not as explicit. This process of taking an existing job or training programme and renaming it an apprenticeship for financial reasons has been referred to as rebadging (Fuller & Unwin, 2009; Richmond, 2018), a concept that has been linked to the Apprenticeship Levy since its introduction.

Rebadging is an ongoing problem, and it has been argued that the Apprenticeship Levy has encouraged some employers to rename existing jobs and training as apprenticeships, and to create what was termed 'fake apprenticeships' (Richmond, 2020). The available post levy research on this by Richmond (2018; 2020) has explicitly focused on apprenticeships in England, where the levy is operated differently to Scotland, and employers are given vouchers which match levy contributions and can then only be used to fund apprenticeship training and assessment. In Scotland however, no such voucher system applies, and employers can use the available funds for apprenticeship training, as well as non-apprenticeship training. This perhaps makes it less likely that Scottish employers



would seek to rebadge roles as apprenticeships for funding purposes, however interviews within the sceptical employer case studies demonstrate that this does still occur within the Scottish context. Interview data suggest that this is done to access specific apprenticeship training programmes made available through the Flexible Workforce Development Fund, as well as potentially to access other forms of funding unrelated to the levy, such as the Apprenticeship Employer Grant and the Adopt an Apprentice Scheme. There are also some intimations made within interviews that other financial motivations, including lower apprentice wages, can encourage engagement.

In terms of financial motivations, 52% of Scottish employers that took part in an SDS (2020) survey that they engaged in part to reclaim funds paid on the levy. As is noted within the *Literature Review Chapter* however, this percentage seems high given that the rise in apprenticeship engagement concomitant with the introduction of the levy in Scotland was minimal, and this figure is likely reflective of flaws in the research design, rather than being representative of the significance of the levy as a driving factor of apprenticeship engagement. Other surveys suggest that a smaller proportion of employers are driven by financial concerns. For example, 11% of newly engaged organisations in Scotland were motivated to engage for financial reasons (IFF, 2021), compared to 9% across the rest of the UK (IFF, 2020). The FSB (2018) publication shows only 5% of small Scottish businesses hired apprentices because it is deemed cost-effective to do so, whilst Mieschbuehler, Neary and Hooley's (2015) work suggests only 3% of English employers brought on graduate apprentices to lower employment costs.

These pieces of research demonstrate relatively similar findings, but none of them included in-depth interviews with employers that might illicit deeper conversations about motivations that organisations may not be particularly keen to disclose. The evidence gathered within this project shows that when there is a prevailing negative attitude within an organisation about apprenticeships, yet the organisation still tends to hire and train apprentices, financial motivations are more likely to be a major driving factor in the decision-making process comparative with organisations that engage with apprenticeships and have a

positive prevailing attitude toward them.

### *Short-Term Focus and Potential for Substitution Strategies*

Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner (2010) conducted research on apprenticeship engagement in Germany and concluded that a significant percentage of employers were motivated to recruit apprentices because they had opted to use a 'substitution strategy'. This means that they would take on apprentices in the short term on low paying contracts with no intention of keeping them on at the end of their apprenticeship, as their wages would rise once they had qualified. These companies would then simply substitute the initial apprenticeship cohort with another, using low waged labour to fill gaps within the organisation and continue to repeat the process. This is distinctly different from rebadging, where apprentices are substituting other workers. With a substitution strategy, new apprentices are instead being substituted in to replace outgoing apprentices. Given the ethical implications of such a strategy, it is no surprise that no organisation openly admits to taking this approach within case study data. However, there is evidence found within gathered data that suggest that there may be some sceptical employers in Scotland using an apprenticeship substitution strategy.

Meyer and Lunnay (2013) argue that when undertaking critical realist research, during the abduction process it is essential to consider 'how something might be'. Whilst there is no direct evidence that the case study sceptical employers engage in a substitution strategy, and no such direct allegation is being made, further interviews with other stakeholders demonstrate that the conditions that can lead to this approach being adopted appear to exist in some sceptical employers. Interviews with trade union representatives, business representatives and current or former apprentices suggest that when an employer engages with apprenticeships to fill short-term gaps with lower salary costs, but the organisation is not committed to a longer-term apprenticeship strategy because of a prevailing negative attitude towards apprenticeships, it can lead to substitution occurring. It is not possible at this point to definitively set out how significant a role

substitution plays in shaping sceptical employer engagement, but we can reasonably denote that the conditions required for this strategy to be undertaken are most closely associated with the sceptical employer.

Within sceptical employer organisations it is shown to be the case that apprentices are often viewed and treated as workers first and learners second. New apprentices are expected to contribute quickly and the scope for learning is focused narrowly on the technical skills required for the specific role. Using Fuller and Unwin's continuum (2004), these apprenticeships would generally tend to be placed along the restrictive end of the spectrum, again re-emphasising the relationship that exists between conceptualisation, implementation, apprenticeship experience and employer motivations for engaging (Brockmann & Smith, 2023).

#### *Organisational Decoupling: Rebadging And Substitution*

The retroductive process that considers the evidence of rebadging, and potential conditions that can foster a substitution strategy, lead to a similar conclusion, thus it is helpful to understand these processes together at this stage. When considering the likelihood that rebadging and substitution strategies influence some employers to engage with apprenticeships, what is found at root is a process of organisational decoupling occurring in two different ways. Organisational decoupling is a term derived from institutional theory, meaning that an organisation may appear to adopt a practice formally, but the reality of how this translates in practice differs considerably from what is outwardly depicted (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This process is more likely to occur when an employer feels pressurised to engage with a policy or initiative, particularly if there is distrust between the organisation and the source of the pressure (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008). This correlates with the negative attitudes that prevail among sceptical employers regarding apprenticeships, and some of the grievances regarding the Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland's management of the levy.

Consider Case Study A as an example. In this instance, the organisation appears to be relenting to that pressure, engaging with apprenticeships, and is thus rewarded financially for doing so. Despite this, the organisation is not offering the additional opportunity that the government had hoped for when devising this policy. One reason that decoupling can occur is that often organisations face contradicting, and in some cases, irreconcilable pressures which cannot all be fully resolved (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Taking a possible substitution strategy as the example this time, organisations opting for this approach may face internal board level pressure to make profit, whilst simultaneously facing external pressure to adhere to socially accepted codes of ethics and legally binding frameworks regarding workplace pay and conditions. By appearing to engage with apprenticeships at face value, knowing that this may reduce salary costs, and that training may be considerably offset through available funding, an organisation in this instance can successfully manage these contradicting pressures, however the full value of an apprenticeship, which is attached to the possibility or likelihood that the apprentice will find permanent work upon completion, is not really on offer.

Ultimately, these contradicting pressures placed on private companies are significant structural drivers of broad swathes of organisational behaviour, and evidence shows that they too significantly impact apprenticeship engagement. Neoliberal capitalism demands that increasing profit is sought by private companies, something that can be achieved by increasing incomings or decreasing outgoings, lest these companies may eventually cease to exist. One of the main ways an organisation may seek to decrease outgoings is by cutting labour costs, but the scope to do so is limited by legal structures and the expectations of society. These pressures apply beyond the scope of sceptical employers, however analysis of case study data for sceptical employers suggests that it is how sceptical employers respond to those pressures that distinguishes the sceptical employer profile from that of other types of organisation.

## Passive Employers

Given that there was only one organisation within the case studies that was identified as a passive employer, data was slightly limited for this quadrant, however analysis of Case Study K and supplementary interviews conducted with individual HR professionals that work for different passive employers enabled the identification of key demi-regularities that influence decision making around apprenticeships. The most prominent theme identified repeatedly within data relate to perceptions of suitability, and how apprenticeships are understood. Evidence shows that a key explanation for why an organisation would demonstrate a prevailing positive attitude towards apprenticeships, whilst it refuses to engage with apprenticeships, is because it is perceived that apprenticeships are unsuitable for the roles that the organisation needs to recruit for. Bredgaard (2017) noted that this was the most likely explanation as to why an organisation might hold a positive attitude towards an ALMP yet not engage with it, and this has clear resonance with apprenticeship engagement also.

Passive employers display a narrow understanding of what an apprenticeship is, limiting the scope of the organisation to consider the full spectrum of apprenticeship frameworks. There is also considerable evidence within Case Study K that the common consensus among HR staff is that the use of apprenticeships within that organisational context would likely lead to a form of exploitation, which is again a significant influencing factor in the decision not to engage. Staff members are explicit that organisational adherence to the principles of fair work precludes it from using apprenticeships in an exploitative way. It is implied within interview data that if it was felt that apprenticeships could be engaged with appropriately, then passive organisations would move to become committed employers. Beneath the surface of concerns around suitability, however, lies a discussion about how and why the organisation has reached this conclusion.

What is perhaps most striking when analysing Case Study K interview data is the way each individual participant speaks very similarly when discussing organisational values, with these staff members all expressing a shared conviction

in the stated strategy and goals of the organisation. This then strongly influences decision making. What we see here then appears to be a solid case of value alignment. As is briefly discussed within the *Literature Review*, value alignment occurs when the core values of an organisation are consistent and in harmony with its actions, goals, decision making processes and often the belief systems of the employees that work for it. There are numerous organisational advantages associated with value alignment (James, 2014), and a strong sense of alignment can increase the extent to which workers identify with their work and inspire increased levels of performance (Sullivan, Sullivan & Buffton, 2001).

There is limited available research on what factors most discourage apprenticeship engagement, particularly within the Scottish context. Two reports produced by the IFF (2020 & 2021) provide us with the greatest insight here, as these pieces of research included employers that do not engage with apprenticeships, asking what prevented them from doing so. It is concluded that in Scotland, 11% of non-engaged employers do not hire apprentices because of a lack of awareness (IFF, 2021), compared to 9% in England (IFF, 2020). As is discussed within the *Literature Review Chapter* though, the scale of the problem may be greater than these findings suggest. Interview data gathered in relation to Case Study K demonstrate that not only do some organisations not fully understand the scope of apprenticeship frameworks now available, but that this lack of understanding is likely to directly impact on employer behaviour.

Case Study K is only one example, yet an interview outside the case studies with an HR professional produced similar thematic content, though in less explicit terms. Grant, who is responsible for the recruitment of a large organisation that operates in Scotland, stated that whilst concerns over fair employment practices are not the primary reason for his company's continued non-engagement, this does influence decision making. Further analysis was therefore required to reveal why value alignment drives decision making processes more forcefully in some organisations in relation to apprenticeships than it does for others.

When conducting retrodution in relation to employers that engage with

apprenticeships, it is argued that a series of structural forces act to drive observable phenomena on the surface, influencing employer behaviour and compelling apprenticeship engagement. It then stands to reason that a lack of structural force compelling engagement can lead other organisations to not engage with apprenticeships. If passive employers are choosing not to engage with apprenticeships because of a perceived lack of suitability, that is linked to either a lack of understanding of apprenticeship frameworks, or a strong commitment to the aligned values of the organisation, the questions which must be asked are why do these organisations have the luxury of being able to be ill-informed about apprenticeships, or the luxury of prioritising values over outputs? As far as staff members within this organisation are concerned, they are faced with the choice of principled non-engagement, or engaging with apprenticeships by rebadging existing jobs as apprenticeships for financial gain, a phenomenon identified as a problem impacting apprenticeship engagement in England (Fuller & Unwin, 2009; Richmond, 2018) and which this project has shown occurs in Scotland, as seen with Case Study A. So, what explains the difference between how Employer A, the sceptical employer, and Employer K, the passive employer, both respond to this choice?

With engaged employers, we see the impact of pressures created by neoliberal capitalism within a profit driven landscape culminating to create a context of sharpening competition for skills, financial support, popular esteem, and cultural legitimacy. These organisations are compelled by these forces to vie for any form of competitive advantage that can be commodified. When looking at passive employers then, it is reasonable to conclude that they either do not feel these pressures as intensely, or rather that they do not exist or impact these organisations in the same way. One thing that Case Study K has in common with the organisation that Grant works for is that neither of them are private profit-seeking companies, with both operating in the third sector, where there is greater scope for value-driven decision-making processes. So, whilst Employer A is driven to rebadge as a way of managing competing pressures, in the need to make profit and engage with state initiatives like apprenticeships, Employer K does not have the same choice to make at all, because it is not required to make profit,

therefore the prospect of opting to rebadge existing roles and engage in a form of decoupling, is not required. The sample size being considered here is small, but the quality and depth of data allows these inferences to be drawn, and further research into the scale of passive employer behaviour with regards apprenticeships within the third sector may be worthwhile to develop on these ideas further.

### Dismissive Employers

As was the case with passive employers, only one case study was identified as being a dismissive employer, which limits data gathered to some extent. However, the depth of research conducted within this case study was greater than in almost all other case studies, with a high number of interviews and a significant degree of documentary analysis taking place. Additional interviews were also conducted with a broad range of stakeholders who were able to meaningfully contribute to the discussion around dismissive employers. A flexible deductive approach was then used to identify key demi-regularities within data, and the primary issue that seems to most influence the apprenticeship engagement approach of dismissive employers on the surface relates to the hiring practices used by some of these companies. Bredgaard (2017) suggested that when utilising this model to measure ALMP engagement that dismissive employers would likely be motivated by profit maximisation and cost reduction, meaning that such organisations would be unmoved by arguments around corporate social responsibility or skill development, and this appears to also apply to dismissive employers when evaluating apprenticeship engagement.

Specifically, this refers to the use of agency workers, subcontractors, self-employed workers and flexible, often short-term, working agreements. It is evidently the case that this significantly drives the employer behaviour of Case Study H, however there is also considerable evidence gathered that suggests that it is likely other companies behave in a similar way. A word that appears repeatedly within data to explain what motivates this employer behaviour is flexibility. This flexibility mentioned speaks to the perceived need for organisations to be able to



hire people for specific jobs, for whatever period the organisation wishes, whilst not committing to staff with long term contracts and being compelled to adhere to the legal rights that are granted to full employees, such as statutory sick pay, annual leave, and protection against unfair dismissal.

Whilst employees of Case Study H proclaim the need for employer flexibility, one interview instead frames this as being about the organisation seeking to retain a greater degree of power in the employment relationship, which is a point worthy of consideration. Regardless of whether this is understood as flexibility or power however, the more of it that is retained by the employer, the less is afforded to the workers. The use of non-permanent contracts and the likelihood of low paid, self-employed staff being utilised means that the Living Wage Foundation (Richardson, 2021) definition of insecure work is met in this instance. Kaine and Josserand (2019) have explicitly written about the tactics used by employers to prioritise flexibility, which often in practice means shifting risk from the employer to the worker. This is precisely what we find within data gathered.

This then begins to echo what Beck (1999) outlined with his notion of Brazilinisation, when he predicted a dramatic increase in insecure and precarious work. The quote provided by Raymond, a trade union activist, in which he depicts the long-term fragmentation of work in the construction industry, captures this particularly well. There is also evidence found that supports Braverman's (1974) contentions of the dangers of deskilling, with evidence presented that when organisations are presented with an opportunity to utilise unskilled workers over skilled workers, they will often seize this chance. Bredgaard (2017) has also noted that dismissive employers in relation to active labour market policies are often motivated by short-term profit and are unmoved by arguments around CSR, and that is what is also found in this instance.

Available evidence within the academic literature suggests that 28% of non-engaged Scottish employers do not hire or train apprentices as part of a strategic choice (SDS, 2020), compared to 32% in England (IFF, 2021). These surveys also both showed that 18% of employers do not engage with apprenticeships because

they are not looking to recruit skilled staff, which is framed in each instance as a structural issue but could also be a strategic choice. The research methods in these reports prevented a more thorough examination of employer motivations and behaviour. This is partly what necessitated the need for further qualitative research on apprenticeship engagement and non-engagement, however it also highlights the challenges of deeper discovery. If an organisation is dismissive about engaging with apprenticeships, it is likely to be dismissive about research regarding apprenticeship engagement. Then, even if dismissive employers could be motivated to participate, and organisational decision making was driven by a desire to deskill the workforce and weaken working conditions over time, how many employers would admit it? This then serves as a clear example of the strengths of critical realist research and demonstrates the need for inferences to be drawn from data analysis.

The difference between the dismissive employers and passive employers identified, both within the case studies and supplementary interviews, is that whilst passive employers tended to be non-profit organisations operating in the third sector, the dismissive employers are private companies operating for-profit enterprises. Whilst it then may be reasonable to conclude that passive employers do not experience the same pressures that influence many of the engaged employers that have been studied, the same cannot be said for dismissive employers. These dismissive organisations theoretically encounter some of the same problems as other private companies, in the need to seek profit amidst competition for skills, funding, and legitimacy. However, what is significant is that the approach that is taken by dismissive employers means that they experience these challenges differently, leading to different outcomes.

Take Case Study H as an example here. This company faces pressure to generate profit, however the approach it has taken has lessened other pressures, meaning that some costs can be lowered to meet the demands of neoliberal capitalism to create profit and increase shareholder value. We can look at the external pressures around skills as an example of this, as this is a pressure that plays a significant role in driving apprenticeship engagement of other firms. Employer H prioritises some

skilled roles that will see full time employees hired and trained, such as in management positions, yet we find evidence of deskilling in other areas where the organisation feels it can benefit from using unskilled labour, often hired through agencies to ensure employer flexibility. This supports claims made by the Fair Work Convention (2022) that deskilling poses a threat to workers within the Scottish construction industry. Ultimately, for the skilled staff required in traditional trades, Employer H engages where necessary through subcontractors, again ensuring that the flexibility and power resides with the organisation. This means labour and training costs can be lowered, providing an opportunity for competitive advantage.

In terms of other pressures, evidence demonstrates that these hiring practices, concomitant with Beck's Brazilinisation (1999) and Braverman's deskilling (1974), are increasingly widespread across the construction industry, thus this approach does not threaten organisational legitimacy among peer companies. Whilst public pressure will impact all companies to some degree, this poses limited challenge to Employer H, as it operates with a relatively low profile, none of these practices are illegal, or likely to be deemed particularly egregious, and the clients the company relies upon are generally large institutions that can afford to pay for massive building projects, rather than individual consumers. Data show the expectations that these clients can place on the company through tender processes around producing a social good, but it also demonstrates that the language built into these agreements, and the lack of monitoring afterwards, combines to allow Employer H, and potentially others like it, to pass these obligations on without being concerned with the threat of sanction.

It is noted within interview data that if tender bids obligated the company to hire and train apprentices directly, then the company would be willing to hire and train apprentices. This is because the greater structural force in this scenario would come from the contractual obligation, meaning that if the company wanted to win big contracts for public works projects, then the demands of the tender would need to supersede the organisational preference for looser employment commitments. Ultimately, it is shown that structural forces are felt and managed

differently when comparing dismissive employers, and committed or engaged employers, which produces different outcomes that are observed on the surface in the different approaches taken to apprenticeship engagement.

### Additional Themes

Whilst previous sections have presented detailed analysis and appraisal of employer types and associated motivations and behaviours, it is also important to critically evaluate the other important themes derived from data that were not specifically associated with any one employer type. These themes relate to the Apprenticeship Levy, the Apprenticeship Employer Grant, the Adopt an Apprentice Scheme, the perception of the role of SDS in governing apprenticeships on behalf of the Scottish Government, and finally, the primary practical obstacles that limits each organisation's level of apprenticeship engagement. These will each be discussed and analysed following the same analytical approach taken in relation to employer types.

The Apprenticeship Levy has been controversial since its introduction in 2017, therefore it is no surprise that there are regular criticisms found within data collected. There are some more interesting findings and insights however, that will be useful for practitioners and policymakers to understand. Firstly, there is a growing understanding of the levy in Scotland. Employers readily acknowledge that they have a better grasp now of how the levy works than they did when it was first introduced. This is generally linked to the efforts of SDS, as their work in guiding employers is recognised by interviewees among engaged organisations. What is more significant though is that the levy itself appears to have little to no impact on the decision-making processes of large employers in Scotland in relation to apprenticeship engagement. This contradicts the findings of the SDS (2020) survey, which claimed that 52% of engaged employers were moved to engage in part because of the levy, but as has been explained within the Literature Review, it seems likely that the research methods of that work encouraged employers to select perceived benefits of engagement, rather than highlighting driving factors.

Taking a qualitative and more in-depth look at the levy has allowed the nuanced perspectives of employers to be better understood. The evidence gathered suggests that the only organisations that are likely to be moved to engage with apprenticeships because of the levy are sceptical employers pursuing a rebadging strategy, a danger previously highlighted as a risk attached to the levy (Richmond & Regan, 2022). Every other interview within every other organisation made it clear that the levy does not directly impact decision-making. There are consistent concerns and frustrations raised about the levy, but no matter how infuriated a senior HR director or CEO happens to be with the levy, they do not decide to change their overarching strategy. The reason for this is that the strategy is not determined or affected by the levy but is instead shaped by the external forces outlined for each employer type. So, for example, a committed employer may have senior staff who are frustrated by the levy, but labour market pressures to manage generational change, or market pressures to attempt to gain advantage through the appearance of CSR commitment, mean that there is a need to continue to engage with apprenticeships, regardless of how agitated those staff may be.

Moreover, it is also found that large employers would generally prefer the English voucher system, especially those with experience of it. The introduction of this system, however, would not increase the engagement levels of these organisations, according to what employers themselves admit. This is the case for the same reason as with the levy, in the organisational strategy is largely driven by structural factors and causal mechanisms that extend beyond having access to reclaim funds through vouchers. Again, the likely consequence of adapting this system would be an increase in rebadging and organisational decoupling. Case study organisations unsurprisingly prefer the system that would see them get more money, but that would not translate into a greater level of meaningful apprenticeship engagement. This approach would inevitably create the type of substantial deadweight losses warned against by the OECD (Kuczera, 2017).

Similar conclusions can be drawn from analysis of data relating to the

Apprenticeship Employer Grant and the Adopt an Apprentice Scheme. Of the two employers that used the AEG, and another two that used the AAS, none engaged purely because of the finances on offer, instead largely claiming the money as a bonus. The financial incentive was not a driving factor in organisational decision making and behaviour. This again is an example of a deadweight loss predicted by the OECD (Kuczera, 2017), as these organisations would have likely taken on apprentices anyway, without the need for a state subsidy. Employers were keen for financial bonuses to continue to be offered for engaging with apprenticeships, however, except for companies embarking on a rebranding strategy, there is no evidence to suggest that this form of financial incentive would increase engagement.

The most significant motivating aspect of the AAS was not the money on offer, but rather the prospect of hiring an experienced apprentice. The reason for this is that hiring an apprentice with several years of experience better equips the organisation to manage and navigate the structural forces that drive engagement. For example, Case Study D did not use this programme, but was enthusiastic at the prospect of doing so in future. It has been shown that the structural forces compelling generational change in the workforce have driven this organisation to move from non-engagement to engagement. The combination of an ageing workforce, and organisational fears over the values of the new generation entering the workforce, has changed the company's strategy. But if this company then has the chance to hire a young person, that they know has successfully worked at another company for one or two years, showing that they are responsible enough for a working environment, and come with a degree of knowledge that simply needs to be added to for them to have a skillset that would allow them to meaningfully contribute, and therefore lessen the burden on older staff and ease the transition that is occurring, then it is no surprise that staff members are very keen on the idea. Managing the structural forces that are exerting pressure is much more appealing on a broader scale than receiving a £5,000 incentive. Data gathered for each of these policies and initiatives ultimately serve to support the conclusions made about the key driving factors of apprenticeship engagement among large employers in Scotland.

When evaluating demi-regularities identified in relation to SDS, there is no direct evidence that SDS has created an increase in engagement within the case study organisations. Despite this, an inference can be made about the role of SDS in driving regular annual increases on engagement levels, impact of the pandemic aside (SDS, 2022). The reason this inference can be drawn is that organisations routinely attribute SDS with increasing the visibility and understanding of apprenticeships and available frameworks. Initiatives like Apprentice of the Year, and Scottish Apprenticeship Week, were both cited on several occasions as examples of things that have contributed to this. Given that evidence has demonstrated that a lack of understanding is a factor in driving non-engagement with apprenticeships, it stands to reason that by increasing understanding, SDS is playing an active role in driving the increase in new apprenticeship starts in Scotland. The other notable theme found in data around SDS relates to frustrations over perceived bureaucracy, but like other issues discussed, this does not dissuade organisations from engaging, because the broader structural issues supersede these concerns.

The final theme to critically evaluate relates to practical obstacles that organisations face that limits apprenticeship engagement past a certain point. It is clear from all engaged case studies that each organisation is limited in some way by a practical obstacle which prevents the hiring of more apprentices past a specific number. This was referred to as the apprenticeship glass ceiling by an interview participant, which is a clear and helpful way of understanding this issue. Whilst many organisations proclaim that they recruit up to the point of that glass ceiling, this is unlikely to always be the case. That employers have limited finances, space and mentoring staff is a fact of life, and it is natural that these structural factors will eventually impede apprenticeship expansion, however. Just as apprenticeship engagement is largely shaped and driven by structural forces, so too are the limits of that engagement. The final chapter of the thesis will include analysis of the glass ceiling for each employer type, and present an argument for what can be done in each instance to improve the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities offered by all large employers in Scotland.

## Conclusion

The key demi-regularities derived from committed employer data demonstrate that the broad surface level motivations for apprenticeship engagement relate to a desire to invest in and develop the workforce, and an organisational emphasis on using apprenticeships to provide opportunities to local communities. When data is then abducted, it is evident that the key broad theoretical motivations relate to organisational adherence to Human Capital Theory and Corporate Social Responsibility respectively. Which of these is the primary motivating theory then dictates how the apprentice employment relationship is understood within these organisations. Workforce development committed employers tend to view apprenticeships as a mutually beneficial economic relationship, whilst ostensibly altruistic committed employers frame the relationship differently, understanding the employer to be a benevolent force for good, and the apprentice as the fortunate beneficiary who therefore owes gratitude and loyalty to the employer. This appears to have an impact on working conditions for apprentices and their desire to remain with the organisation.

When retrodution occurs in relation to human capital driven engagement, we see that standard employer skill needs are exacerbated by a range of factors. Skills gaps across industries pose challenges, whilst employers are adapting to generational change in the workplace, as a larger proportion of workers reach retirement age than the number available to replace them. Negative perceptions of young workers make this transition harder, whilst other structural factors increase employer difficulties, including the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and the rise in young people choosing to attend university. This combines to encourage committed employers to engage with apprenticeships and drives behaviour on the surface. The process of retrodution is slightly less clear regarding committed employer organisations that are primarily driven to engage with apprenticeships due to an ostensible commitment to corporate social responsibility, however it is likely that whilst some employers may be engaging in good faith, motivated by strong organisational values or pushed by the individual agency of staff, there will likely be some employers that purport to engage out of a sense of altruism, whilst



actually engaging to further its own interest because of the benefits associated with a strong CSR strategy.

With sceptical employers, there is slightly greater differentiation in the factors that drive engagement, but three key demi-regularities are identified within data. The first of which is the notion that some employers engage with apprenticeships because it is understood as being the 'done thing' in the industry, and there is a belief that there is a pressure and expectation that employers engage on that basis. This amounts to a process of mimetic isomorphism (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983), that sees organisations mimic the processes, policies, and behaviours of other similar organisations to attain organisational legitimacy within its field. Legitimacy theory suggests that attaining legitimacy is essential for organisations, and this structural force necessitates conformity (Haveman, 1993), which in this instance means engaging with apprenticeships.

The other key themes that appear to motivate apprenticeship engagement on the surface for sceptical employers are financial concerns, which manifest in various ways. Within sceptical employers, we often find a stronger short-term focus than is found with committed employers. To make short-term gains, sceptical employers are more likely to turn to rebadging or substitution strategies when it comes to apprenticeships. In doing so, they exemplify organisational decoupling, where these organisations attempt to reconcile competing pressures, such as the need to make profit by lowering costs and remaining within the bounds of both the law and societal expectations, by appearing to engage with apprenticeships in a forthright manner. In these instances, however, these employers are not offering the full opportunity and security typically associated with and expected of an apprenticeship. It is worth noting that sceptical employers tend to be private companies, making them more susceptible to market pressures which drive this behaviour.

Passive employers however tend to be non-profit entities, which goes some way to explaining the behaviour we find among these organisations. With passive employers, the key surface level issue is the perceptions of apprenticeship

suitability for the organisation. The case study organisation in this instance demonstrated a low level of understanding of available apprenticeship frameworks, therefore staff believed that if the organisation was to engage with apprenticeships, the only option would be to participate in a rebadging process. This is not something the organisation was willing to consider due to strongly held principles and value alignment across the staff. Whilst this was the only case study of a passive employer, similar themes were detected within interviews with individual staff from other passive employers outside the scope of the case studies. It is argued then that this is part of a pattern of behaviour for this employer type, and that these organisations behave in this way because they do not experience the same external pressures of private companies to cut costs and produce profit. This then means that a lack of awareness and/or the prioritisation of collective values can occur without a threat to the organisation. It is the lack of this pressure that drives non-engagement of passive employers.

With dismissive employers, these organisations again tend to be profit-seeking private companies, meaning that they do experience typical market pressures, but choose to respond to them in a markedly different way than committed or passive employers. What is found in these instances is a preference for significant employer flexibility, which in practice means hiring staff through subcontractors and agencies, using short-term contracts, and minimising the commitment of the company to its staff. This also means not engaging with apprenticeships, as committing to years of work and training does not fit with the organisational strategy. This approach grants greater power to the employer, allowing it to cut labour and training costs and potentially worsen conditions. If skills are needed, or if tender bids for projects demand apprentices be hired on jobs, the company will subcontract this out to a third-party organisation to protect itself. This can create greater insecurity and poorer working conditions for staff and apprentices, potentially increasing external pressure at a societal level, but the company is happy to make that trade-off for the financial gain. As these practices are increasingly commonplace in the construction industry, there is also little industry pressure to speak of. This is what explains the difference in approach between the dismissive employer and the other employer types.

Final analysis of this chapter comes in relation to the other themes and demiregularities identified within case study data that are of importance to understanding employer engagement amongst large employers in Scotland, but that are not specifically related to, or characteristic of, any given employer type. It is shown that the Apprenticeship Levy has had no impact on the decision-making process of employers, except when organisations embark upon a rebadging strategy. Large organisations in Scotland would broadly prefer to see the English voucher scheme used in Scotland, as it would allow them to reclaim a larger amount than is currently available to them, but there is no evidence that any organisation would see its engagement levels rise if that funding was made available to it. This money would likely become a deadweight loss. Evidence therefore supports the continuation of the current approach embarked upon by SDS and the Scottish Government. Other schemes introduced with a financial incentive, the AEG and the AAP, are supported by employers as they are generally keen to take a cash incentive and therefore wish to see these initiatives extended, but these incentives would again become a deadweight loss as evidence shows they would not lead to an increase in engagement. Analysis demonstrates that it is the structural forces and causal mechanisms that drive engagement decisions, and only sceptical employers with a short-term focus, often manifesting in rebadging and substitution strategies, would be tempted by an immediate cash injection. And just as structural forces drive engagement, they too curtail it, as practical obstacles, generally dictated by physical space or market pressures, create an apprenticeship glass ceiling within every organisation that limits engagement past a certain point.

## Chapter 10. Conclusion

### Introduction

Apprenticeships are a core aspect of the Scottish Government's attempt to provide more opportunities to young people in Scotland (Stando, 2021). There has been a concerted effort driven by the government, and managed by Skills Development Scotland (SDS), to increase the number of new apprenticeship starts over the last decade (Scottish Government 2014). These efforts have been quite successful, in that the number of new apprenticeship starts in Scotland had increased every year since this policy focus up to 2020, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Skills Development Scotland, 2022). Despite this success, only 19% of Scottish employers recruit and train apprentices, and 63% of these employers only have one apprentice on their books (IFF, 2021). There is clear room then for further improvement, both by encouraging more employers to engage with apprenticeships, and by encouraging other employers to extend their current level of apprenticeship engagement. The drive to increase apprenticeship opportunity has been a significant driver of this research. Skills Development Scotland have contributed to funding the work to help develop knowledge that can support these efforts.

Evidence has been gathered and analysed, providing tangible, practical knowledge that will support practitioners and policymakers in their drive to increase apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. Key structural forces, causal mechanisms, and compelling motivating factors that drive employer decision making have been revealed, and an increased understanding has been developed. There is a need to go further still however, as analysis of data also allows for evidence-based inferences to be made about what interventions might be made by practitioners and policymakers to increase engagement. This chapter therefore presents discussion and analysis that considers how engagement might be improved within each employer quadrant within Bredgaard's typology. This also includes specific discussion around policy implications relating to the operation of the Apprenticeship Levy in Scotland, and the financial incentive schemes that were

introduced during the pandemic to boost apprenticeship engagement.

There has previously been a lack of in-depth research on apprenticeship engagement in Scotland, particularly on the employer decision making process when considering engagement. The *Literature Review Chapter* has outlined important state commissioned research that has helped to provide a cursory overview of issues that can encourage or discourage engagement, but there has been a need for a more thorough and in-depth investigation of what drives employer decision making. Available academic research on apprenticeship engagement has also been disconnected and sporadic, with no clear consensus over how engagement should be defined and evaluated, and how that evaluation should be conducted. This research project was designed and carried out with these problems in mind. This has created a clear theoretical contribution by demonstrating the utility of Bredgaard's (2017) framework, and by proposing development of the typology to allow consideration for dynamic movement across the employer quadrants. This chapter includes a clear explanation of the theoretical contribution made.

It is also important to recognise and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses within any piece of academic research. This is therefore also outlined within this chapter, demonstrating the value of work undertaken, whilst acknowledging limitations and identifying potential areas for future research. A final summary of empirical findings and conclusive remarks are then presented to complete the thesis.

### Theoretical Contribution

It has been demonstrated that within the available academic literature that considers apprenticeship engagement, there is a lack of consensus over how apprenticeship engagement should be defined, what key things should be considered in relation to apprenticeship engagement, and how research should be conducted to critically evaluate it all. Most research therefore focuses largely upon

employer motivations for engaging or not engaging (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018). There has been a reductive tendency within this approach, however, as there had been little effort made to thoroughly consider how different motivations interact and counteract one another to influence employer decisions and behaviour. Additionally, little to no consideration is given to the possibility that engaged employers may still be discouraged to engage by some issues, and that non-engaged employers may be pushed to consider engaging by other factors. There has also been limited consideration given to how prevailing attitudes within an organisation influence apprenticeship engagement. Overall, available research has been unable to provide an in-depth critical analysis of all key aspects of apprenticeship engagement.

It is therefore proposed that a holistic and consistent research approach to understanding and analysing apprenticeship engagement was required. Given that there was no theory or framework within apprenticeship engagement literature that could be usefully applied to facilitate such an approach for this research, a typology was identified within literature relating to employer engagement with active labour market policies, namely Bredgaard's (2017) typology. The reasons behind the selection of this framework are provided in full within the *Literature Review Chapter*. The typology categorises employers based on engagement or non-engagement with a policy or initiative, and the attitude towards it. The utility of this framework for evaluating apprenticeship engagement has been tested and demonstrated. Eleven case study organisations have been critically examined and placed within the typology, as discussed within the *Case Study Overview Chapter*, and as shown again below:

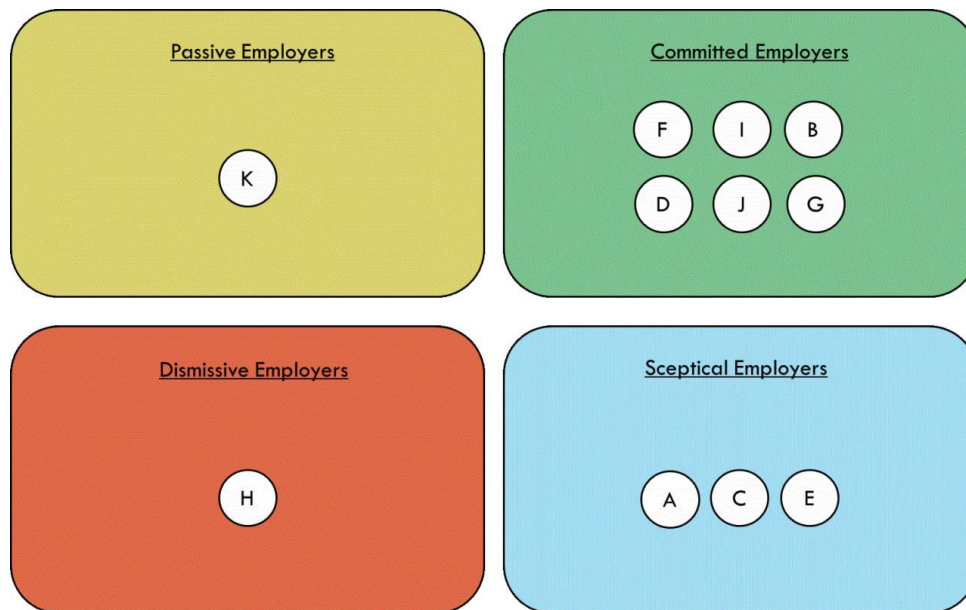


Figure 30. Full Typology Placement.

The placement of employers within these quadrants substantiates Bredgaard’s (2017) contention that an employer can hold a negative attitude regarding a policy or initiative and still choose to engage with it. Equally, an organisation might display a positive attitude about a policy or initiative, yet not engage with it. This is demonstrably the case with apprenticeships, as is shown by Case Study K and Case Study H. Furthermore, data gathered for each employer type has been analysed using Fletcher’s (2016) three-step critical realist method, demonstrating that each employer type is characterised by specific motivations and behaviours, in response to structural forces, as well as external and internal pressures. The utility of the framework has therefore been demonstrated as a valuable academic tool for researching and evaluating apprenticeship engagement.

It is also evident from data gathered that apprenticeship engagement is not a static phenomenon, but rather a dynamic process. An organisation’s engagement or prevailing attitude regarding apprenticeships may change over time. This is demonstrated by Case Study A and Case Study D, as both organisations would previously have been categorised as dismissive employers, but have moved across the quadrants, becoming engaged employers. It is important to recognise the potential for employer engagement to change, and to build this into the

framework. It is essential that change can be identified so that further analysis can occur to reveal what has driven the change in employer behaviour. This can help add to understanding of employer behaviour and provide specific insight into factors that may act to change and increase the level of engagement of other employers.

It is proposed therefore that Bredgaard's (2017) typology be modified to allow for dynamic movement. This means that researchers would not solely look to capture a moment in time snapshot of employer engagement with apprenticeships but would seek to understand current, past, and potentially future levels of engagement. This would therefore provide a much more comprehensive overview of employer decision making and behaviour and provide greater depth of information for policymakers and practitioners about what drives change in employer engagement with apprenticeships. This theoretical contribution provides a framework for a more consistent, holistic approach to researching apprenticeship engagement moving forward.

### How Might Engagement Be Improved?

The Scottish Government (2014) has sought to increase the number of apprenticeship opportunities available to people in Scotland over the last decade. This process has been managed by SDS and there has been some success in this regard, with an increase in the percentage of employers engaged with apprenticeships (IFF, 2021), an increase in the number of available apprenticeship programmes (Scottish Government, 2017), and a steady increase in new apprenticeship starts (Skills Development Scotland, 2022) before some of that progress was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these successes, policymakers and practitioners have been devising strategy and making decisions without detailed evidence of what drives employer decision making around apprenticeships, and without substantiated knowledge of what would be most likely to increase engagement. This section of the thesis will therefore provide a critical discussion of each employer type, drawing on data, and further developing



the analysis provided within the *Discussion Chapter* by proposing actions and interventions that are deemed most likely to improve the level and quality of apprenticeship engagement within each quadrant.

### *Committed Employers*

From the perspective of policymakers and practitioners, committed employers represent the ideal employer type within the framework used. As these organisations engage with apprenticeships and demonstrate a prevailing positive attitude, there is no scope to move employers in a positive direction across the quadrants of the typology. Despite this, there is still room to improve the level of engagement of some committed employers, and potentially a need to work to maintain the level of engagement of others. Evidence demonstrates that there are two broad types of committed employers in relation to apprenticeship engagement: development driven committed employers and ostensibly altruistically driven committed employers. It is necessary to discuss these types separately, even within the one employer quadrant, as the motivations and structural drivers are distinctly different.

Development driven committed employers engage with apprenticeships as part of a long-term strategy of investment in the human capital of the organisation (Schultz, 1961). The need to turn to apprenticeships to help recruit and develop the skills required by organisations appears to be increasing for these employers because of sharpening competition for skills (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; FSB, 2018). This is a result of growing skills gaps and increasing labour market pressures, linked to broad structural factors such as the ageing workforce and the need to manage generational change. What is found though is that there is an equilibrium within these organisations brought about by competing pressures. As there is a prevailing positive attitude regarding apprenticeships within these organisations, they are happy to invest in the recruitment and training of apprentices as part of a long-term strategy to manage the external pressure of a challenging labour market up to the point that this pressure is met with the equal force of a practical barrier

that prevents engagement from extending any further.

This point is discussed within the *Discussion Chapter* as the ‘apprenticeship glass-ceiling’ and whilst it exists for all employers, committed development employers are the only organisations that tend to hire apprentices either up to this point, or up to the point at which it is perceived that the glass ceiling has been reached. This is an important distinction. For example, within Case Study I, it is suggested that the barrier presents in the form of sleeping space for apprentices, and for Case Study G, it is linked by an interview participant to the available number of suitable mentors. These practical barriers prevent extended engagement with these specific apprenticeship programmes for these specific job roles, but that is not to say that these barriers necessarily prevent the extension of engagement entirely. There exists a possibility that there are other suitable apprenticeship programmes for other job roles that these organisations could engage with, but that have not been considered. It is proposed then that if committed development organisations are keen to engage to their full potential apprenticeship capacity, the only way to extend the engagement of these organisations is to demonstrate that they have not reached that capacity. This can only occur by continuing to work to broaden understanding of the wide range of apprenticeship programmes that are now available. Many of these organisations report a strong relationship with SDS, meaning that there is scope for this to be pushed in these instances until the apprenticeship glass ceiling is truly reached.

Data gathered corroborate evidence that notions of altruism can encourage employers to engage with apprenticeships (SDS, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022; Rusten, Grimsrud & Eriksen; Szekely & Knirsch, 2005). For altruistically driven committed employers, the key issue that is most likely to impact future level of engagement is not the perceived glass ceiling, but rather the looming threat that these organisations may soon lower or withdraw their engagement. These organisations engage with apprenticeships as a means of giving back to local communities, either as an act of genuine kindness, or potentially to reap the benefits associated with being perceived as a responsible corporate citizen (Sanchez-Torne, Moran-Alvarez & Perez-Lopez, 2020; Nickerson, Lowe & Sorescu,

2021; Hur, Kim & Woo, 2013). The problem arises with the way that this motivating factor then impacts how the apprenticeship is understood within the organisation. As this act is seen as one of charity, the employer casts itself as a benevolent force for good, and the apprentice as a fortunate beneficiary of that kindness. The actual relationship that exists, which is that of an employer and an employee in a mutually beneficial arrangement that sees the organisation receive the apprentice's labour in exchange for a salary and training towards a qualification, is masked. This leads to unrealistic expectations within these organisations, particularly with regards to retention. It is simply expected that these apprentices will stay with the company beyond the period of their apprenticeship, even if the terms and conditions on offer are not appealing to the worker.

Whilst committed development employers pro-actively work to provide an attractive package that will help convince completed apprentices to remain with the organisation, working to ensure that the long-term investment strategy pays off, altruistically driven committed employers tend to believe that loyalty is already owed, therefore often do not offer the same kind of package. Interview data suggest that the result of this is that there is a greater problem of retaining apprentices within altruistic committed employers than development centric ones. As these organisations already feel that they are doing the apprentices a favour, there is then a deep sense of betrayal in some instances when people leave. The occurrence of this cycle is now causing some of these organisations to reconsider their strategy of engagement. It is therefore the case that the understanding of apprenticeships primarily as an altruistic endeavour poses a threat to the growth of apprenticeship opportunity in Scotland.

It is proposed that practitioners communicating and working with engaged employers make a concerted effort to educate organisations on the folly of understanding apprenticeships as an extension of corporate social responsibility. Rather organisations should conceptualise apprenticeships as a vehicle for developing industry wide experts (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and apprenticeship programmes should be designed and implemented using the principles of expansive apprenticeships (Fuller & Unwin, 2003). Work should also be done to demonstrate

the benefits of pursuing a fair work model (Fair Work Convention, 2016) for apprentices to ensure that conditions are fair and equitable for the role. This broad approach would be more likely to ensure that staff are retained in the longer term and the employer would benefit from the skills and experience that they have helped to develop in their apprentices.

It is also shown that a greater degree of trade union involvement in the design and management of apprenticeship schemes can aid retention rates, which as noted, is a particular concern for committed altruistic employers, but this finding theoretically applies to all engaged employers. Trade union involvement is beneficial in part because it can create increased buy in from the apprentice for learning, echoing past findings of Findlay, Findlay and Warhurst (2007), and because the socialisation process for new apprentices is helped by senior union figures, ensuring that the apprentices feel themselves to be a contributing part of the team more quickly. This has positive outcomes for all stakeholders. Encouraging fair work principles and trade union engagement among committed employers would therefore have the potential to improve the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities offered by committed employers.

### *Sceptical Employers*

Sceptical employers engage with apprenticeships even though the prevailing attitude within these organisations towards apprenticeships is negative. Analysis of data show that this is generally because sceptical employers use apprenticeships for financial reasons, to meet immediate recruitment needs, or because of perceived pressure to conform to industry norms. The sceptical employer is often driven by short-term concerns, which differs from the longer-term focus found among committed employers. What is also seen is that even though these organisations recruit and train apprentices, they do not appear to do so to the point of their apprenticeship ceiling, but rather to the point that their immediate needs are satisfied. In some instances, such as when there is rebadging or substitution occurring, there is a degree of deceptiveness to sceptical employer

engagement that is decoupled from the outward appearance that the organisation is engaging in good faith. There is room for improvement then in the attitudes and behaviours of these organisations to both increase engagement and to enhance the quality of current apprenticeship programmes.

Financial considerations are a key driver of sceptical employer engagement with apprenticeships, and this is broadly supported by past research that has shown that perceived financial benefits motivate some employers to engage with apprenticeships (Skills Development Scotland, 2020; IFF 2020, 2021 & 2022; McIntosh, 2007). Data demonstrate however that the financial motivations of employers can take several forms. Case Study A is an example of an organisation that has explicitly taken a trainee programme and rebadged it as an apprenticeship programme because it has allowed the company to access forms of funding as a result. Evidence from the EDSK demonstrates that rebadging is a significant problem in England (Richmond, 2018 & 2020), linked to the voucher system used to distribute the Apprenticeship Levy. Whilst data show that rebadging exists in Scotland, the process of doing this is less clear-cut than in England because the voucher system is not used. Whilst interviews across various employer types bemoan the bureaucracy attached to apprenticeships and various forms of funding in Scotland, it is likely the case that these checks limit the ability of some employers to abuse funding systems without providing genuine apprenticeship opportunities. This supports the processes put in place by SDS, however, there are evidently still some loopholes that employers are finding and exploiting, and further work is required to close these to stop rebadging from occurring.

There are fewer mentions of lowered apprentice salaries as being a factor in organisational decision-making, and when this is discussed, it is often caveated with an explanation that contends this is a peripheral factor next to broader strategic concerns. That said, organisations may be hesitant to admit to being driven to engage with apprenticeships because of lowered wages, and interviews outside the scope of the case studies from people with experience of working with employers on these matters suggest that they have knowledge of it being a more significant factor than employers themselves are willing to acknowledge. This

discussion is quite closely linked to the way in which sceptical employers often use apprenticeships to meet immediate or short-term recruitment needs, driven by market pressures. The challenge that practitioners face here is in pushing sceptical employers to take a longer term view, and they can only do so successfully if they can convince these employers that a longer term recruitment strategy, akin to the development strategy of some committed employers, would allow them to more effectively manage external market pressures and benefit financially in the long run (Lerman, 2019).

The other key issue that influences sceptical employer engagement with apprenticeships is the belief that apprenticeships are simply the 'done thing' within the company or industry. This belief turns into an expectation that engagement is required, resulting in a form of mimetic isomorphism, where organisations mimic the behaviours, processes, and practices of other similar organisations, in part to attain organisational legitimacy (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). Some interviews, for example with Thomas in Case Study E, portray a somewhat lethargic attitude, where staff and employers are happy to go along with apprenticeships without a great deal of thought and strategy. The challenge facing practitioners in this instance, is in engaging with these organisations and convincing them that there is a benefit in leading the pack in terms of apprenticeship engagement, rather than being satisfied aiming for the middle. The biggest hurdle here does not appear to be any practical barriers representing the apprenticeship glass ceiling, but rather the prevailing negative attitude about apprenticeships found within sceptical employers.

Changing prevailing negative attitudes towards apprenticeships within an employment organisation is a major challenge facing skills practitioners in Scotland. Albarracin and Shavitt (2018) explain that attitudes are generally dictated both by both historic memory and current evaluations, with the latter often determined by contextual change. This means that attitudes are stable but also subject to change. This makes changing employer attitudes regarding apprenticeships a difficult task, but not an impossible one. We have seen with Case Study D, a clear example of structural factors altering the context and changing

the attitudes within an organisation over time, moving that organisation from being a dismissive employer to becoming a committed one. To begin changing employer attitudes, it is first important to acknowledge that attitude is an important aspect of apprenticeship engagement. As has been noted throughout this thesis, there has been an inconsistency in how apprenticeship engagement has been understood and evaluated. The development of Bredgaard's (2017) framework allows academics and practitioners to adopt a more consistent approach moving forward. Moreover, by measuring employer attitude (as well as engagement), practitioners can then identify those organisations that it should focus resources on attempting to change their overall perspective, in the hopes of encouraging them to become committed employers and to increase the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities on offer.

### *Passive Employers*

Passive employers have a positive prevailing attitude of apprenticeships yet do not engage with them. There is only one passive employer within the case study organisations, however analysis of this employer coupled with supplementary interviews has allowed a picture to be developed of passive employer behaviour. The key surface level issue that dissuades passive employers from engaging with apprenticeships is the belief that apprenticeships would not be suitable. This relates to both strong value alignment across the organisation, as well as limited understanding of the broad range of apprenticeship frameworks now available in Scotland. Passive employers tend to be non-profit seeking organisations, thus are not subject to sharp market pressures, meaning that there is greater scope for the prioritisation of shared values, and there may be less pressure to explore new employment and training strategies.

Interviews with staff as part of Case Study K demonstrate that there is a clear consensus among employees that apprenticeships could not work for the organisation. This is because the main role that is hired for requires a relatively short training period, thus it is believed that turning this role into an

apprenticeship would constitute a rebranding strategy, which would undermine the social values of the organisation. Staff within passive organisations have a limited, and often outdated, understanding of what constitutes an apprenticeship. This corroborates existing research that shows that a lack of understanding of apprenticeships is a factor that discourages some employers in Scotland (IFF, 2021), across the UK (IFF, 2020) and in other parts of the world (Jansen & Pineda-Herrero, 2019) from engaging. Within Case Study K, the language used in interviews with staff often refers to trades, and gendered terminology is used throughout. What is implied is that apprenticeships are seen as primarily existing to support young working-class men enter work in the skilled trades, which characterises how apprenticeships have been historically understood. In modern Scotland however, apprenticeship frameworks are available to all people over the age of 16, and across almost all industries and sectors. There are also a host of apprenticeship frameworks for positions such as IT, management, customer service, administration, and facilities management, which could theoretically be used by most large employers, including Case Study K.

Passive employers then are not limited by an apprenticeship glass ceiling imposed by its values, but rather by a perceived glass ceiling conjured due to a lack of knowledge and understanding. Passive organisations therefore likely represent the ripest quadrant for practitioners to drive an increase in apprenticeship engagement. These organisations already exhibit a prevailing positive attitude towards apprenticeships, they simply lack the knowledge that would allow them to engage. Working to educate these employers is likely to result in them choosing to engage if they can be convinced that there are apprenticeship programmes available that are suitable to them.

### *Dismissive Employers*

Dismissive employers represent the least ideal employer quadrant from the perspective of practitioners and policymakers within Bredgaard's (2017) typology, as they do not engage with apprenticeships and demonstrate a prevailing negative



attitude regarding them. There is scope therefore to attempt to move these organisations both up and across the quadrant, to hopefully create engagement and a positive attitude towards apprenticeships, leading to increased opportunities for people in Scotland. As was the case with the passive employer quadrant, only one case study organisation was designated as a dismissive employer, however analysis of data gathered from this organisation, coupled with supplementary interviews, has allowed for understanding to be developed about dismissive employer behaviour. Dismissive employers tend to be profit seeking companies that pursue a broad human resource strategy that prioritises employer flexibility. Dismissive employers may also seek to deskill work where possible in a bid to decrease wage labour costs. With Case Study H, the organisation has a strong preference for using non-permanent contracted workers, instead relying on agency staff, self-employed contractors, and small teams of subcontractors to carry out skilled work.

Whilst previous employer quadrant discussions have related to skills practitioners and policymakers, the structural forces and employer behaviours revealed among dismissive employers present a challenge that extends generally beyond the reach of SDS and its staff. The responsibility for responding to the rise of insecure work in Scotland is one that sits with policymakers both in the Scottish and UK parliaments. Case Study H operates within the construction industry, and an interview with Raymond speaks to the fragmentation of that industry in recent decades, an analysis that is supported by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Trades Union Council (2018). The Scottish Government has set out its plan (2022b), in conjunction with the Fair Work Convention, to become a leading Fair Work nation by 2025. The Fair Work Convention (2016) defines fair work by five key factors, one of which is security, noting that whilst context and competition shapes the prospects for security, the majority of the burden of insecurity cannot rest with ordinary workers.

Some smaller practical steps can also be taken. For example, within the Scottish Government's 'Fair Work Commitment' (2022), it is noted that there is a need to embed fair work practices in procurement and tendering for public bid contracts.

Employer H is a case in point where current tendering bids could be improved to strengthen the fair work agenda. It is noted within interview data that the organisation has committed to ensuring apprentices are hired on tender contracts it wins, but because the organisation does not commit to hiring apprentices directly, and because monitoring is weak once building begins, it allows the company to pass this obligation on to subcontractors, where evidence suggests there is a higher risk of exploitation. Obligating organisations that win large public contracts to not only hire a set number of apprentices directly, but also to ensure that these apprentices complete their training and are offered skilled work at the end of their qualification, building in strong monitoring processes, would be a simple step towards improving the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities available to people in Scotland.

With this in mind though, the root cause of the problem is that the structural forces of the market pressure of neoliberal capitalism and relatively weak employment regulation means that some employers will seek to deskill work as predicted by Braverman (1974), and some employers will also seek to deflect any risk away from the organisation on to the employee, often at the cost of the security and conditions of the worker, as predicted by Beck (1999). This will inevitably mean that these organisations will be dissuaded by the commitment attached to apprenticeships unless other structural forces demand that they engage. It is unlikely that the current UK Government will prioritise reshaping work in a way that seeks to build worker security, power, training, pay and conditions. Therefore, the onus will largely be on the labour movement to build that power outside of parliament halls, and for the Scottish Government, the Fair Work Convention and SDS to make what gains are possible to ensure that employers are either compelled or incentivised to provide as many fair work opportunities for people as possible. Apprenticeship engagement is central to that task.

## Policy Implications

A key motivation behind this research was in the desire to develop understanding of what interventions may help to increase apprenticeship engagement. The previous section has discussed steps that may be taken by skills practitioners and policymakers specifically relating to each distinct employer type. In gathering and analysing data within the project however, there are some broader implications that must also be clearly explained and summarised. These relate to policy interventions and programmes designed to boost apprenticeship engagement. Namely, there are important points to consider about the Apprenticeship Levy and how it is operated in Scotland, and about the pandemic period financial incentive schemes introduced in Scotland, in the Apprenticeship Employer Grant and the Adopt an Apprentice Scheme. This section will outline the policy implications for the key findings that relate to these initiatives.

### *Apprenticeship Levy in Scotland*

The Apprenticeship Levy has been controversial since it was first introduced in 2017 (Richmond, 2018), and it is found that senior staff and HR professionals in Scotland are generally located on a spectrum between resigned ambivalence and continued frustration regarding the levy. Regardless of individual and prevailing organisational perspectives, the levy has a very limited impact on the decision-making process when employers are considering apprenticeship engagement, except in the instances where employers are contemplating undertaking a rebadging strategy to claim funds linked to the levy. There is no other evidence found that suggests that the levy has directly encouraged employers to increase engagement with apprenticeships.

Large organisations that pay the levy in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, particularly in England, tend to be particularly critical of the way that the levy is operated north of the border. This is natural given that the research has focused on large employers, and large employers benefit more from the English system as they

receive vouchers for the funds they pay into the levy pot, whereas in Scotland the input of large employers is redistributed in other ways. Despite the protestations, it is evident from data gathered that additional funds being made available would be unlikely to make these organisations hire and train more apprentices, as they are either already engaged up to the point of a perceived apprenticeship glass ceiling, with a practical barrier preventing further engagement, and/or there are broader strategic concerns that dictate recruitment and training policy within the organisation that would be unmoved by a short term cash injection. It is therefore proposed that the Scottish approach to utilising the funds generated by the levy should be continued, with broad investment to support all employers, ahead of moving to a voucher system that would benefit larger organisations without being likely to increase engagement.

### *Financial Incentive Schemes*

As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold around the globe, countries around the world chose to go into lockdown to slow the spread of infection and save lives. With major restrictions put on people's movement, many workers were expected to work from home, but there was an economic cost to this approach, and job losses soon followed. 2020/21 also seen the first decline in number of new apprenticeship starts in Scotland in years. To combat this, and to boost apprenticeship engagement at a time of profound economic emergency, the Scottish Government introduced two schemes designed to incentivise employers to hire apprentices during this period: the Apprenticeship Employer Grant, and the Adopt an Apprentice Scheme. These schemes differed slightly but both involved a lump sum payment being made available to employers for hiring apprentices during a set period. As was noted in the *Introduction Chapter*, given that the Scottish Government opted to offer lump sums to employers to engage with apprenticeships at a time of acute crises, it is fair to suggest that this was driven by the belief that financial incentives are the most effective tool available to this end.

The evidence presented within the case study organisations however demonstrates

that whilst employers were generally happy to claim funds when the opportunity presented itself, and whilst most would happily see these schemes be continued if it meant that they could benefit from lump sum payments, financial incentives in this form are not likely to impact the decision-making process for most organisations. Like the above discussion relating to the Apprenticeship Levy, the only organisations that may be tempted by this would be sceptical employers, but again with that comes the risk of duplicitous engagement in the form of potential substitution and rebadging. Ultimately, this approach risks creating deadweight losses for the Scottish Government without tangible benefit, as was warned about by the OECD (Kuczera, 2017). The Adopt an Apprentice Scheme however does have significant potential to persuade some organisations to increase its engagement, even on a one-off basis, as employers are very keen to take on an experienced apprentice with a short time left to gain their full qualification. It is therefore proposed that this scheme should be cemented permanently without a financial incentive attached.

### Research Strengths and Limitations

It is important within any large research project to acknowledge both the strengths and limitations of the work presented. This subchapter will therefore outline the benefits of the approach taken and the tangible consequences, before then offering an honest critical reflection on areas of weakness. Available academic literature on apprenticeship engagement has been sporadic and disconnected, with little consistency of approach. It was therefore deemed that a more strategic and considered approach was required. This included presenting a clear definition of employer engagement within this context, and then testing the utility of a suitable framework that could improve understanding of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland, but also be used by researchers to frame apprenticeship engagement moving forward to develop greater consistency within the literature. Using Bredgaard's typology (2017) to structure the approach has helped achieve each of these aims. This has ensured that this research project has considered all key aspects of employer engagement, rather than singularly focusing on identifying

some motivating issues.

The most significant available studies that consider apprenticeship engagement, both within the Scottish and UK contexts, have been state commissioned quantitative surveys that have been quite narrowly focused (Skills Development Scotland, 2020; IFF, 2020, 2021 & 2022). As is discussed within the *Literature Review*, these have helped to identify some key issues that can motivate or demotivate apprenticeship engagement, however the research approaches taken have lacked the required level of depth and nuance to truly develop understanding of how different issues, structural factors, and causal mechanisms interact and drive employer decision making with relation to apprenticeships in Scotland. This research project has provided the depth and nuance missing from current literature. By undertaking detailed case studies of employer organisations, utilising in-depth semi structured interviews and documentary analysis, analysed using a critical realist driven approach (Fletcher, 2016) it has been possible to provide valuable insight into employer decision making in each instance. The use of supplementary interviews with different stakeholders then strengthened the findings as it allowed for a broader range of perspectives to be considered, and provided evidence for inferences to be made about employer behaviour in instances where organisational staff members may have been less willing to forthrightly divulge processes and motivations. The depth and scope of this work makes it distinct from any other notable work that considers apprenticeship engagement in Scotland.

There are however limitations to the study that must be acknowledged and considered. The most significant limitation is the lack of input within the case studies of non-engaged employers, both passive and dismissive. As was noted within the *Research Design Chapter*, it was exceptionally difficult to find large employment organisations based in Scotland that opted not to engage with apprenticeships, to engage with research about apprenticeships by allowing a case study to be conducted. Efforts were made through different contacts, by reaching out to organisations directly and by using outreach staff both within the University of Glasgow and SDS, but only one dismissive employer and one passive employer

was willing to engage. This unfortunately does impact upon the strength of the findings in these instances, however additional interviews were conducted to help with this. It was found that some non-engaged employers were willing to permit staff to participate in one-off interviews, rather than a full case study, which was perceived in some instances as either overly intrusive, or overly time-consuming. Interviews with other stakeholders, particularly with those who have experience of speaking and working with non-engaged employers on these matters, proved highly valuable. Despite these efforts though, the work would be improved by further participation of non-engaged employers, not least because it is these organisations that most need to be understood if practitioners and policymakers are to be supported in improving the number of apprenticeship opportunities available to people in Scotland.

A significant finding of this research was that Bredgaard's typology (2017) is a very useful tool for evaluating apprenticeship engagement. Moreover, it is argued that because employer engagement is a dynamic process rather than a static phenomenon, the framework should be developed to factor this in, and future research undertaken using the tool should involve researchers asking interview questions about past, present and potential future behaviour, to glean a more comprehensive picture of what is driving employer behaviour. Within the course of this research, interviews were conducted that led to discussions about past engagement within some organisations, creating worthwhile findings. However, the interview questions were not initially designed with this purpose in mind, and it was only in the data analysis process that the true value of considering past engagement came to light. Therefore, it stands to reason that this work could have been improved by attempting to engage more interview participants in discussion about past and future engagement to a greater degree.

The other aspect to consider, when critically evaluating the strengths and limitations of the study, refers to an aspect which has elements of both. Critical realism demands that the researcher critically assesses surface level phenomena to understand what operates beneath that surface. This often means critically analysing not only what is said, but also what is not said. It also leads to

revelations of structural forces and causal mechanisms when the evidence can be generated that clearly demonstrates that driving factors of surface level behaviours, however when crystal clear evidence does not present itself in data analysis, it is sometimes necessary to make inferences of what the most likely explanation is. This is both a strength and a weakness. In this instance, critical realism allows the motivations and behaviours of employers to be assessed in a truly critical fashion, without having to take what is said in interviews, or published on company websites, at face value without looking at the broader contextual considerations. This has led to inferences being made within this work that are based on very strong evidence, and it is argued that this adds significantly to current understanding of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. There are some inferences however that are based on reasonable conclusions from the best available evidence. This is not to discount these, but rather to suggest that these inferences, findings, and conclusions can be strengthened further with the development of further evidence and knowledge. Future research will therefore be able to build on this work to add to what is known about apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in Scotland, and about apprenticeship engagement more broadly.

### Future Research

There is significant scope for future research that further develops understanding of employer engagement with apprenticeships, both within the Scottish context and more broadly. There is a specific need to focus on non-engaged employers in Scotland, as was highlighted in the previous discussion relating to the limitations of this project. This project has built an initial employer profile for both passive employers and dismissive employers, but there is a need to investigate further to either corroborate the findings generated here, or to help identify other structural forces or causal mechanisms that drive the decision making of these employer types. One way to do that may be to move away from the case study approach. It has been beneficial to use case studies in this instance. It has helped to thoroughly evaluate organisations, as well as to ensure that they could be categorised



accurately within Bredgaard's typology (2017), and to then create a profile of the behaviour of each employer type. However, it is also the case that non-engaged employers were hesitant to engage with full case studies and appeared more open to one-off interviews.

A future research project on apprenticeship engagement in Scotland could be designed primarily around conducting semi-structured one-off interviews with staff members based within organisations that do not engage with apprenticeships, specifically staff with responsibility and decision-making power in relation to recruitment and training, to improve upon current understanding of what influences these decisions. This is adjudged to be the next important step in creating a comprehensive understanding of apprenticeship engagement in Scotland. Also, given that this project has determined that large employers are generally not influenced by the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy, future studies would have little reason to be limited to levy-paying organisations.

There is also scope to build on this research project, both in Scotland, and outside of the Scottish context, using the adaptation to Bredgaard's (2017) typology proposed within this thesis. Bredgaard's framework provides a strong and clear structure through which apprenticeship engagement can be understood and evaluated, by considering participation and attitude, whilst allowing for the behaviour of each employer type to be better understood. However, the framework did not adequately account for changing employer participation and attitudes, therefore this thesis has argued for this to be factored into the typology. This would also involve framing questions for participants in a way that would deliberately invoke responses to provide a full picture of an organisation's engagement in the past, present, and future. Not only would this allow for changing employer behaviour to be identified and recognised, but it would also enable a thorough examination of what has driven any aspects of change, and potentially highlighting what factors might drive future change.

Future research on apprenticeship engagement can therefore utilise this framework to improve understanding of employer behaviour in any context. This

would help to develop knowledge that would be valuable within the chosen context. For example, using the typology to frame employer engagement with apprenticeships in England would be useful for practitioners and policymakers in England. This would also be useful to Scotland, as it would allow for a comparison of data and findings, highlighting what factors are corroborated cross-border, and showing what factors are not found within different contexts, therefore highlighting what factors are context specific.

### Concluding Remarks

This work was carried out to improve understanding of apprenticeship engagement broadly, and to explicitly evaluate employer behaviour within the Scottish context. This involved analysis of employer decision-making, as well as critical evaluation of the most relevant and recent government policies and initiatives. The thesis was designed around specific research questions, with an emphasis on using Bredgaard's typology to frame data analysis, create profiles of employer behaviour and to then make evidence-based inferences on what interventions may increase apprenticeship engagement moving forward.

- Can the typology of Bredgaard be used as a useful tool to categorise employers in terms of apprenticeship engagement?
- Can the key causal mechanisms, structural forces and compelling motivating factors that drive apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in Scotland be revealed and understood?
- Is there a relationship between the employer types, identified through Bredgaard's typology, and the factors that drive apprenticeship engagement, that would allow for employer profiles to be developed?
- Can an evidence-based inference be made as to what interventions may improve the attitudes and engagement levels of each employer type with regard to apprenticeships?

To conclude the thesis, it is important to offer final reflection on the research questions set out in the *Introduction* and the *Literature Review*. This final section will briefly reflect on each of these questions, outlining clearly how each point factored into the thesis, and by explaining how each question was answered within the work presented.

It has been clearly demonstrated that Bredgaard's typology is a useful tool for the categorisation of employers when evaluating apprenticeship engagement. Every case study organisation has been accurately categorised, and every quadrant of the framework has been utilised. This means that the central premise of the typology has been supported - that employers can hold a negative attitude about an initiative and engage, or hold a positive attitude and opt not to engage. The case studies demonstrate that there is no direct link between prevailing organisational attitude to apprenticeships, and whether the organisation hires and trains apprentices. However, despite the utility of the framework being demonstrated, a limitation was also uncovered. It has been shown that apprenticeship engagement is a dynamic and changing process, rather than a static phenomenon. It is proposed then that any framework that seeks to measure and evaluate apprenticeship engagement must also account for and capture movement and change. This, it is argued, can help build a clearer picture of employer behaviour, and may also develop a better understanding of what drives change, therefore aiding practitioners and policymakers seeking to bring about improvements in the form of increased quantity and quality of available apprenticeship opportunities.

It is also the case that the key causal mechanisms, structural forces, and compelling motivating factors that drive apprenticeship engagement amongst large employers in Scotland have been revealed and understood. It is evident that broad structural pressures at the macro level within neoliberal capitalism force organisations into a form of competition for funds, skills, legitimacy, and reverence. How organisations experience and respond to these pressures is then often what determines how they approach apprenticeships. Contextual changes

are then capable of driving changes in employer behaviour. The various pressures, structures and motivations have been explained and then analysed in detail within the *Discussion Chapter*. By utilising Bredgaard's typology to categorise employers, and then having analysed data relating to each quadrant of the framework, it has been possible to create a clear profile of each employer type.

The work has demonstrated clearly what structures, pressures, factors, and motivations are most important for each type of employer. It has also been possible to go further than mere description by offering evidence-based inferences about the real motivations of employers, and what interventions would be most likely to improve or maintain the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities provided by these organisations. Currently, 19% of Scottish employers engage with apprenticeships, demonstrating that despite the success that SDS and the Scottish Government have had in increasing the number of apprenticeships in Scotland, there remains significant scope for further improvement. This work will hopefully provide tangible support to those ongoing efforts.

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## Appendix A. Thematic Coding List

Code 1. Upskilling by hiring apprentices.

Code 2. Upskilling by training existing employees as apprentices.

Code 3. Motivated by perceived quality of training/qualifications.

Code 4. Hiring apprentices for long term.

Code 5. Hiring apprentices for short term.

Code 6. Encouraged to engage because it is the done thing in the industry.

Code 7. Discouraged from engaging because it is not the done thing in the industry.

Code 8. Being encouraged to engage to give back to the community and provide opportunities.

Code 9. Being encouraged to engage because it will help the organisation if they are seen to give back to the community.

Code 10. Engaging with apprenticeships because of a contractual obligation to provide opportunities within the community.

Code 11. Encouraged to engage by the financial incentive of the AAA scheme.

Code 12. Encouraged to engage by the prospect of hiring a more advanced apprentice.

Code 13. Encouraged to engage by financial incentive of AEG scheme.

Code 14. Discouraged from engagement because the organisation does not require any/many skilled workers.

Code 15. Discouraged from engagement because employer does not wish to commit to employment over length of apprenticeship.

Code 16. Discouraged from engagement because employer prefers to use agency staff.

Code 17. Discouraged from engagement because employer prefers to use part-time/flexible contracts.

- Code 18. Discouraged from engagement because risk of hiring apprentice seen as too high.
- Code 19. Discouraged from engagement because risk of hiring young person seen as too high.
- Code 20. Encouraged to engage in order to hire young people whilst a 'white cloth'.
- Code 21. Discouraged from engaging due to fear of poaching.
- Code 22. Discouraged from engaging because it is easier to poach than to train.
- Code 23. Encouraged to engage because they believe their offer to employees can ward off poaching.
- Code 24. Encouraged to engage because they do not believe poaching to be a threat in specific industry.
- Code 25. Discouraged from engagement due to lack of understanding of apprenticeships.
- Code 26. Discouraged from engagement because of perceptions of bureaucracy.
- Code 27. Discouraged from engagement because of negative perception or relationship with Skills Development Scotland.
- Code 28. Encouraged to engage because of positive perception or relationship with Skills Development Scotland.
- Code 29. Discouraged from engaging due to inability to attract required standard of candidate.
- Code 30. Encouraged to engage because apprenticeships understood as important tool to attract most talented/suitable applicants.
- Code 31. Discouraged from engaging because they do not have the physical space for apprentices.
- Code 32. Discouraged from engaging because they do not have the staff to supervise apprentices.
- Code 33. Discouraged from engaging because they do not have sufficient training facilities.
- Code 34. Encouraged to engage by low salaries of apprentices.
- Code 35. Encouraged to engage by perceived low training cost of apprentices.

- Code 36. Discouraged from engagement by perceived high cost of training.
- Code 37. Encouraged to engage by Apprenticeship Levy.
- Code 38. Discouraged to engage by Apprenticeship Levy.
- Code 39. Encouraged to re-badge training by Apprenticeship Levy.
- Code 40. Attitude and engagement unaffected by Apprenticeship Levy.
- Code 41. Encouraged to engage specifically because of the way the Apprenticeship Levy is managed in Scotland.
- Code 42. Discouraged from engagement specifically because of the way the Apprenticeship Levy is managed in Scotland.
- Code 43. Encouraged to engage by specific staff members.
- Code 44. Discouraged to engage by specific staff members.

## Appendix B. Case Study Details.

Employer A		
<u>Industry</u>	Energy	
<u>Sector</u>	Secondary	
<u>Revenue (approx)</u>	£5-15m	
<u>Levy Paying?</u>	Yes	
<u>Ownership</u>	Owned by Venture Capitalist Firm	
<u>Living Wage Paying?</u>	No	
<u>Union Engagement?</u>	No	
<u>Interviews</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>
	Bruno	Management Level
	Javid	HR Staff Member
	Ross	Management Level

Employer B		
<u>Industry</u>	Energy	
<u>Sector</u>	Tertiary	
<u>Revenue (approx)</u>	£20-30m	
<u>Levy Paying?</u>	Yes	
<u>Ownership</u>	PLC	
<u>Living Wage Paying?</u>	No	
<u>Union Engagement?</u>	Unknown	
<u>Interviews</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>
	Peter	Management Level
	Kathleen	Management Level
	Hannes	HR Staff Member

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**Employer C**

Industry Construction  
Sector Secondary  
Revenue (approx) £20-30m  
Levy Paying? Yes  
Ownership PLC  
Living Wage Paying? No  
Union Engagement? No

**Interviews**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>
Carl	Management Level
Claire	HR Staff Member
Cameron	Management Level
Reo	HR Staff Member

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**Employer D**

Industry Food & Drink  
Sector Secondary  
Revenue (approx) £60-70m  
Levy Paying? Yes  
Ownership Owned by large multinational company  
Living Wage Paying? Yes  
Union Engagement? Unknown

**Interviews**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>
Megan	HR Staff Member
Hayley	HR Staff Member
Gemma	HR Staff Member
Hamza	Apprentice
Kristi	HR Staff Member

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**Employer E**

Industry Energy  
Sector Food & Drink  
Revenue (approx) £200-300m  
Levy Paying? Yes  
Ownership PLC  
Living Wage Paying? No  
Union Engagement? Yes

**Interviews****Name****Position**

Kieran	HR Staff Member
Shannan	HR Staff Member
Thomas	HR Staff Member

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**Employer F**

Industry Manufacturing  
Sector Secondary  
Revenue (approx) £350-450m  
Levy Paying? Yes  
Ownership PLC  
Living Wage Paying? No  
Union Engagement? Yes

**Interviews****Name****Position**

Jimmy	Management Level
Denula	HR Staff Member
Elliott	HR Staff Member

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**Employer G**

<u>Industry</u>	Energy
<u>Sector</u>	Primary
<u>Revenue (approx)</u>	Over £5bn
<u>Levy Paying?</u>	Yes
<u>Ownership</u>	Owned by Venture Capitalist Firm
<u>Living Wage Paying?</u>	Yes
<u>Union Engagement?</u>	No

<u>Interviews</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>
	Siobhan	Management Level
	Magdalena	Management Level
	Daly	HR Staff Member

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**Company H**

<u>Industry</u>	Construction
<u>Sector</u>	Secondary
<u>Revenue (approx)</u>	£750m-850m
<u>Levy Paying?</u>	Yes
<u>Ownership</u>	PLC
<u>Living Wage Paying?</u>	No
<u>Union Engagement?</u>	Yes

<u>Interviews</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>
	Greg	Management Level
	Brendan	Worker
	Joe	Worker and Trade Union Rep
	Daniel	Management Level
	Mikaela	Associate

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**Employer I**

Industry Transport  
Sector Tertiary  
Revenue (approx) £200-250m  
Levy Paying? Yes  
Ownership State Owned  
Living Wage Paying? Yes  
Union Engagement? Yes

**Interviews**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>
Alistair	Worker & Trade Union Rep
Stuart	HR Staff Member
Mohammad	HR Staff Member

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**Employer J**

Industry Retail  
Sector Tertiary  
Revenue (approx) Between £250m - £350m  
Levy Paying? Yes  
Ownership Owned by Multi-National Corporation  
Living Wage Paying? No  
Union Engagement? Unknown

**Interviews**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>
Kevin	Management Level
Umar	HR Staff Member
Chris	Apprentice



**Employer K**

Industry

Non-Profit

Sector

Third

Revenue (approx)

Between £30m - £50m

Levy Paying?

Yes

Ownership

Member-led Organisation

Living Wage Paying?

Yes

Union Engagement?

Yes

Interviews

Name

Position

Joseph

HR Staff Member

Niamh

HR Staff Member

Maria

Management Level

Jacynta

HR Staff Member

## Appendix C. Interview Questions

### Sample Interview Questions

#### *Senior staff/HR staff/Management Sample Questions*

1. What is your job title and what does your role within your organisation entail?
2. How long have you worked with for this organisation?
3. How many employees work within your organisation?
4. What are the key skills requirements for your organisation? Do you have a skills strategy?
5. Do you have any input in the recruitment process within the organisation? If so, what is your role here?
6. What do you believe are the most important things that shape your recruitment and training strategy?
7. What is your role in the decision-making process around the recruitment of apprentices?
8. What is your attitude towards apprenticeships? Is this shared within your organisation?
9. Does your organisation hire and train apprentices? If so, how many are typically recruited and to what roles?
10. What are the most important factors that are considered when the organisation is considering engaging with apprenticeships?
11. What are the perceived benefits of recruiting apprentices?
12. What are the perceived negatives to recruiting apprentices?
13. What is your experience of apprenticeships in practice?
14. What factors influence decision making in relation to apprenticeships?
15. Are there any alternatives to recruiting apprentices that are given consideration?
16. Are you aware of the Apprenticeship Levy and how it works? Do you feel this has been clearly explained to employers?
17. How has the Apprenticeship Levy influenced engagement with apprenticeships?

18. Will the Apprenticeship Levy be considered when the organisation is deciding whether to engage with apprenticeships in future? How do you see this developing?
19. Did the company utilise the adopt an apprentice scheme or the employer grant that was made available?
20. Would you support the continuation of these schemes?
21. Would the continuation of these schemes encourage you to recruit more apprentices?
22. Tell me about your engagement with trade unions on apprenticeships?
23. Tell me about your experience of Skills Development Scotland?
24. Could you tell me about any relationships you have with local colleges or learning providers?
25. Is it always the intention of the organisation to keep apprentices on beyond the period of their apprenticeship?
26. Is there anything more that could be done to support employers on apprenticeships?

## Appendix D. Participant Information Sheet.



University  
of Glasgow

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College of Social  
Sciences

### Participant Information Sheet

Apprenticeship Engagement and Large Employers in Scotland.

Paul Quigley

[xxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:xxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk)

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

This research project intends to study how large employers engage with apprenticeships in Scotland following the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 and as the world adapts to the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. You have been selected as a possible participant as it is felt that your perspective could be valuable in helping to broaden understanding of this issue.

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you can revoke your consent at any time.

The interview is likely to take approximately 40 minutes however this is dependent upon what you are comfortable with and willing to divulge.

Your data will be stored securely using an encrypted device in a locked storage. You will be given a pseudonym within the finished thesis. Your employer will also be anonymised, being referred to by the sector the organisation operates in, rather than by name. We will do all that we can to ensure that you cannot be identified by your responses.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

Your data will be used as part of a PhD thesis and may also potentially be used as part of conference papers, journal articles, published reports and presentations. Data collected may also be shared with Skills Development Scotland.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee

To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: [Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

\_\_\_\_\_End of Participant Information  
Sheet\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E. Privacy Notice

### PRIVACY NOTICE

#### Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project: Apprenticeship Engagement Amongst Large Employers in Scotland.

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#### Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project How Do Large Employers Engage with Apprenticeships in Scotland? This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

#### Why we need it

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and contact details in order to conduct our research. We need your name and contact details to arrange interviews, or contact you afterwards if required.

We only collect data that we need for the research project and you will be assigned a pseudonym within any work derived from this data, in an attempt to maintain your anonymity.

It may however be impossible to guarantee absolute anonymity even with these measures in place. Please see accompanying **Participant Information Sheet**,

#### Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

#### What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit is processed by: **Paul Quigley**. In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe such as pseudonymisation, secure storage, and, encryption of files and devices. Please consult the **Consent form** and **Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

Due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way.

We will also provide you with a copy of the study findings and details of any subsequent publications or outputs on request.

### **What are your rights?\***

GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see [UofG Research with personal and special categories of data](#).

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact [dp@gla.ac.uk](mailto:dp@gla.ac.uk)

### **Complaints**

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter. Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at [dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved via the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee or relevant School Ethics Forum in the College.

### **How long do we keep it for?**

Your **personal** data will be retained by the University only for as long as is necessary for processing and no longer than the period of ethical approval 01/01/2024. After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your **research** data will be retained for a period of ten years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.

End of Privacy Notice \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix F. Consent Form



College of Social  
Sciences

### Consent Form

Title of Project: Large Employers and Apprenticeship Engagement in Scotland.

Name of Researcher: Paul Quigley

Supervisor: Melanie Simms

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

- ♦ All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- ♦ The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- ♦ The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- ♦ The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- ♦ I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
- ♦ The data collected may be shared with Skills Development Scotland.

- ♦ I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant ..... Signature .....

Date .....

Name of Researcher .....Signature .....

Date .....

## Appendix G. Interview Participants.

1. Aidan, Apprentice.
2. Alistair, Worker and Union Rep, Case Study I.
3. Artur, Skills Practitioner.
4. Asjad, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.
5. Barry, Business Interests Group Representative.
6. Brendan, Worker, Case Study H.
7. Bruno, Management Level, Case Study A.
8. Cameron, Management Level, Case Study C.
9. Carl, Management Level, Case Study C.
10. Cascia, Business Interests Group Representative.
11. Chloe, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.
12. Chris, Apprentice, Case Study J.
13. Claire, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.
14. Daly, HR Staff Member, Case Study G.
15. Daniel, Management Level, Case Study H.
16. Denula, HR Staff Member, Case Study F.
17. Eamon, Apprentice.
18. Elliott, HR Staff Member, Case Study F.
19. Gabrielle, Trade Union Representative.
20. Gemma, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.
21. Grant, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.
22. Greg, Management Level, Case Study H.
23. Hamza, Apprentice, Case Study D

24. Hanin, Fair Work Advocate.
25. Hannes, HR Staff Member, Case Study B.
26. Hayley, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.
27. Helen, Skills Practitioner.
28. Jacyntha, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.
29. Javid, HR Staff Member, Case Study A.
30. Jimmy, Management Level, Case Study F.
31. Joe, Worker and Trade Union Rep, Case Study H.
32. Jordan, Apprentice.
33. Joseph, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.
34. Justin, Skills Practitioner.
35. Kathleen, Management Level, Case Study B.
36. Kevin, Management Level, Case Study J.
37. Kieran, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.
38. Kristi, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.
39. Lee, HR Professional, Interviewed Separately.
40. Liam, Trade Union Regional Organiser.
41. Magdalena, Management Level, Case Study G.
42. Maria, Management Level, Case Study K.
43. Megan, HR Staff Member, Case Study D.
44. Michael, Training Provider.
45. Mikaela, Case Study H Associate.
46. Mohammad, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.
47. Niamh, HR Staff Member, Case Study K.
48. Pdraig, Trade Union Representative.

49. Peter, Management Level, Case Study B.
50. Raymond, Trade Union Representative.
51. Rebecca, Skills Practitioner.
52. Reo, HR Staff Member, Case Study C.
53. Ronan, Apprentice.
54. Ross, Management Level, Case Study A.
55. Ryan, Learning Provider.
56. Shannan, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.
57. Siobhan, Management Level, Case Study G.
58. Stuart, HR Staff Member, Case Study I.
59. Thomas, HR Staff Member, Case Study E.
60. Umar, HR Staff Member, Case Study J.

## Appendix H. List of Case Study Documents and Additional Sources.

1. Academic Journals (multiple)
2. Building Project Documentation
3. Careers Website Documentation
4. Company LinkedIn Profiles (multiple)
5. Company Profile Document
6. Company Reports (multiple)
7. Construction Brochure
8. Construction News & Construction Enquirer articles
9. Corporate Social Media Accounts
10. Corporate Social Responsibility/Sustainability Commitments
11. Council for Inclusive Capitalism Website
12. Diversity Commitments Document
13. Economic Impact Assessment Document
14. Financial Reports (multiple)
15. Gender Pay Gap Reports (multiple)
16. 'Great Place to Work' Accreditation
17. Industry Podcast
18. Internal Recruitment Documentation (multiple)
19. Internal Training Guidelines
20. Internal Workforce Analysis (partially redacted)
21. Job Advertisements (multiple)
22. Job Descriptions (multiple)
23. Korn Ferry Website

24. Masters Dissertation
25. Newspaper Articles (multiple)
26. Organisational Case Study Documents (multiple)
27. Parliamentary Archives
28. Project Bid Documents
29. Published Research on the company (multiple)
30. Recruitment 'Aspirational Profile' Document
31. Recruitment Drive Document
32. Recruitment Meeting Minutes/Notes (multiple)
33. Scottish Enterprise YouTube
34. Sister Training Company Website
35. Skills Website Documentation
36. Social Value and Community Report Document
37. Training Programme Document (multiple)
38. Video on organisational culture on recruitment partner site
39. Website Articles (multiple)
40. 'What We Do' Report
41. Workforce Analysis Excel
42. YouTube Lecture
43. YouTube Interview
61. YouTube Company Adverts/Videos (multiple)