

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

What drives employer engagement with apprenticeships in Scotland?

Paul Quigley*

Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G11 6EY, UK

ABSTRACT

This study explored employer engagement with apprenticeships in Scotland, using Bredgaard's typology to categorize employers into four types: committed, sceptical, passive, and dismissive. Committed employers, driven by workforce development or corporate social responsibility, actively engaged with apprenticeships but their primary purpose often determined how these were managed and experienced. Sceptical employers, motivated by industry norms, financial incentives, or short-term recruitment needs, exhibited inconsistent engagement and were prone to practices like rebadging or substitution. Passive employers often lacked understanding of apprenticeship frameworks and feared value misalignment, leading to non-engagement. Dismissive employers prioritized flexible labor practices and cost reduction, viewing apprenticeships as incompatible with broader operational strategy. By advancing theoretical and practical insights, this work contributes to efforts to enhance the quantity and quality of apprenticeship opportunities in Scotland. It underscores the need for tailored strategies to address the diverse factors impacting employer engagement.

Key words: apprenticeships, employer, engagement, framework

INTRODUCTION

This paper is drawn from a PhD thesis that explored apprenticeship engagement among large employers in Scotland. The Scottish Government set ambitious targets to increase apprenticeship starts from 2014, achieving progress until the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted this growth ([Skills Development Scotland, 2022](#)). Despite these efforts, in 2020 only 19% of Scottish employers hired and trained apprentices, and of those employers, 63% hired only one apprentice ([Industrial Facts and Forecasting, 2022](#)). Literature is available that evaluates apprenticeships, critiquing national programs and policies ([Fortwengel *et al.*, 2021](#)), and examining best practice for apprenticeship frameworks ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)). However, research on what influences employer engagement with apprenticeships has been limited, particularly in Scotland, with only quantitative, mostly

state-funded research available ([Industrial Facts and Forecasting, 2022](#); [Skills Development Scotland, 2020](#)). These publications offer broad insight into general motivating factors, but greater depth and nuance has been required to determine how different causal mechanisms, and structural forces interact to shape employer decisions.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

A number of 11 qualitative case studies were conducted within large organizations across Scotland, each consisting of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis (Table 1).

Accessing employers who do not participate in apprenticeship programs for comprehensive case studies proved challenging. Recognizing this limitation, supplementary evidence was sought through additional

*Corresponding Author:

Paul Quigley, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G11 6EY, UK. Email: Paul.Quigley@glasgow.ac.uk.

Received: 27 March 2025; Revised: 15 May 2025; Accepted: 19 May 2025

<https://doi.org/10.54844/vte.2025.0942>


 This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, which allows others to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format non-commercially, as long as the author is credited and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

Table 1: Case study details

Organization	Industry	Interviews
A	Energy	Two senior managers, one HR staff member
B	Energy	Two senior managers, one HR staff member
C	Construction	Two senior managers, two HR staff members
D	Food& Drink	Four HR staff members, one apprentice
E	Energy	Three HR staff members
F	Manufacturing	Two HR staff members, one senior manager
G	Energy	Two senior managers, one HR staff member
H	Construction	Two senior managers, two workers/trade union representatives, one associate
I	Transport	Two HR staff members, one worker/trade union representative
J	Retail	One senior manager, one HR staff member, one apprentice
K	Third sector	Three HR staff members, one senior manager

HR, human resource.

interviews (Table 2). Some non-engaged employers permitted senior human resource (HR) personnel to participate in one-off interviews rather than full case studies, and four such interviews were conducted two per employer type. Beyond the case studies, 21 supplementary interviews were held with a range of relevant stakeholders. This multi-faceted approach provided a broader understanding of employer decision making, particularly within non-engaged organizations. 60 interviews were conducted in total.

Table 2: Supplementary interviews

Interviews	Number
Apprentices	4
Skills practitioners	4
HR staff member (outside case studies)	4
Business interest representatives	2
Trade union representatives	4
Fair work advocate	1
Learning providers	2

HR, human resource.

Case study organizations were categorized using Bredgaard's (2017) typology based on engagement with and attitude toward apprenticeships. Bredgaard initially developed this framework to measure engagement with active labor market policies in Denmark, whereas its broader utility was tested within this work to determine its value for categorizing employer engagement with apprenticeships. The framework separates employers

into four categories: passive, dismissive, committed and sceptical. Committed employers hold a positive attitude towards the labor market initiative in this case apprenticeships and actively engages. The sceptical employer also engages, however does not share the positive attitude of the committed employer. The passive employer holds a positive view of apprenticeships but does not engage. Finally, the dismissive employer holds a negative view and does not engage. A critical realist analysis (Fletcher, 2017) of data was conducted, revealing characteristics of employer behavior within each category and allowing for the key structural forces and causal mechanisms driving apprenticeship engagement in Scotland to be identified and understood.

RESULTS

Case study data was evaluated, and each employer was placed within the Bredgaard (2017) typology. Data for each employer type were further analyzed to identify common characteristics. The results were: passive 1; dismissive 1; committed 6; sceptical 3.

The following discussion is based both on evidence from the participants in the case studies and from the supplementary interviewees.

Committed employers were found across a range of industries, and analysis identified two distinct types: those primarily driven by workforce development, and those primarily motivated by altruism. Although all committed employers cited both workforce development and community citizenship as reasons for engagement, interview data revealed that one of these motivations typically dominated. Consequently, it was necessary to analyze these two types separately, even within the same quadrant, as their motivations and structural drivers differed significantly, with four identified as development driven, and two as altruistic.

Development-driven committed employers viewed apprenticeships as a long-term investment in human capital (Schultz, 1961). This was often shaped by sharpening competition for skills, linked to growing skill gaps and labor market pressures. With this type of employer there was an equilibrium held by competing pressures. For other committed employers, organizational altruism was the primary motivator for engagement with apprenticeships. These employers noted that they used apprenticeships as a vehicle to give back to the local communities in which they operated.

Sceptical employers were generally found in the energy and construction industries within this study. Data revealed three key themes: industry expectations, financial considerations, and the use of apprenticeships

to meet short-term recruitment needs. While none of these themes applied universally, each was evident in multiple cases. These dynamics occurred independently thus they required separate analysis. Unlike committed employers, who exhibited two distinct behavioral profiles, sceptical employers were characterized by varying combinations of these themes. Several case studies highlighted the role of mimetic isomorphism in organizational decision-making, which occurs when organizations mimic the processes, value systems and mannerisms of other similar organizations, to be perceived as legitimate in their field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Participants in these organizations said that they engaged with apprenticeships in part because similar organizations did too.

Financial considerations, such as access to funding and lower apprenticeship wages, influenced decision-making for some sceptical employers. Within Case Study B, interviewees stated that their organization wanted to run trainee programs but framed these jobs as apprenticeships to secure funding. This practice, known as rebadging, involves relabelling existing roles or training as apprenticeships for financial gain, a trend reported to be exacerbated by the UK's Apprenticeship Levy, contributing to the rise of "fake apprenticeships" (Richmond, 2020). Unlike England's voucher system, Scotland's model directs funds into both apprenticeship and non-apprenticeship training, reducing but not eliminating rebadging.

The findings suggest that financial considerations and the need to address immediate recruitment needs can sometimes align, creating conditions where substitution strategies may emerge. This involves recruiting apprentices to fulfil short-term staffing requirements, sometimes at lower wage levels, without a clear intention to retain them post-qualification. While direct evidence of this practice was not found within the case studies, supplementary interviews with trade unions, skills practitioners, and apprentices indicated that such instances have occurred, particularly among employers who, despite engaging with apprenticeships, maintain a sceptical or negative view of them.

For non-engaged organizations (passive and dismissive), only one case study per employer type was included. However, supplementary interviews, including with HR staff from non-engaged employers from outside of the case studies, as well as with others who have experience of working with such employers, enabled the development of employer characteristic profiles. Among passive employers, the prominent themes were suitability and alignment with organizational values.

Passive employers view apprenticeships positively but considered them to be incompatible with their

organization. These organizations tended to display a somewhat limited understanding of the breadth of apprenticeship frameworks now available in Scotland. Passive employers also tended to be non-profit seeking, third sector organizations, and consequently had strongly held values reflective of their purpose. Interviews revealed concern among passive employer staff that apprenticeships pursued to cut costs could potentially be exploitative, which would conflict with their commitments to fair work principles.

Dismissive employers seemed to prioritize operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness, with less emphasis on broader considerations such as social responsibility or long-term skill development. Their hiring strategies, which tended to favour the use of agency workers, subcontractors, self-employed individuals, and flexible, often short-term arrangements, presented a barrier to apprenticeship uptake. The concept of "flexibility" emerged consistently within the data as a key factor influencing their decision-making, reflecting a strategic preference for workforce management that minimized long-term commitments and statutory obligations. This approach, while aligned with their operational priorities, inherently limited their willingness to invest in apprenticeships, as such programs typically require a more sustained and structured engagement with employees.

CONCLUSION

This study examined employer engagement with apprenticeships in Scotland by applying Bredgaard's typology (2017) to categorize employers and develop behavior profiles for each type. The findings highlight the necessity for nuanced, tailored interventions to enhance apprenticeship opportunities available in Scotland. It is therefore essential to not only examine the factors driving employer behavior, but also to explore the implications for practitioners and policymakers seeking to expand the availability of apprenticeship opportunities across Scotland.

Committed employers were primarily motivated by workforce development or organizational altruism. Development-focused employers maintained a positive outlook on apprenticeships, viewing them as a strategic long-term solution to labor market challenges, and their engagement was only constrained by perceived practical barriers. To enhance their participation, interventions could highlight opportunities for expanding apprenticeships into new roles and emphasize the growing range of available frameworks.

Altruistically motivated employers viewed apprenticeships as a platform to support local communities. This perspective arguably led to unrealistic retention

expectations, as these employers seemed to assume that apprentices would choose to stay with them post-qualification without the need to implement a retention strategy.

In contrast, development-driven employers proactively provided attractive retention packages to protect their investment. Interview data indicated that this contributed to retention challenges among altruistic employers, prompting some to reconsider their engagement. Practitioners could address this by emphasizing the reciprocal nature of apprenticeships and long-term benefits of engagement, to protect or even improve upon the current level of participation of these employers.

For sceptical employers, engagement was primarily motivated by a variation of three key themes. These were industry norms, financial considerations, and short-term recruitment needs. Those influenced by industry norms viewed apprenticeships as an entrenched, almost inevitable feature of their sector, with implicit expectations sustaining participation. Financial motivations often centred on accessing funding, sometimes leading to the rebranding of existing roles or training as apprenticeships. Additionally, evidence showed that some sceptical employers may be drawn to the lower wage costs associated with apprenticeships to address immediate staffing needs, though potentially without intending to retain apprentices post-qualification. The common thread among this employer group was their short-term focus, and the challenge facing skills practitioners seeking to enhance apprenticeship opportunity in Scotland is to foster a longer-term approach amongst these organizations and to shift their attitudes over time.

Passive employers demonstrated a slightly limited understanding of the full range of available apprenticeship frameworks. Interview data suggested, however, that these employers might be more inclined to engage with apprenticeships if they were presented in a manner that aligned with their organizational values and strategic objectives. This indicates a potential pathway for encouraging greater participation among this group, provided that apprenticeship opportunities are framed in a way that resonates with their priorities and operational context. Dismissive employer behavior regarding apprenticeships is often shaped by a focus on operational flexibility, cost-efficiency, and the use of alternative labor arrangements, reflecting a prioritization of immediate organizational needs over long-term workforce investment. These employers present the most significant challenge, as they neither engage with apprenticeships nor hold a positive view of them. While broader issues, such as the prevalence of agency work and insecure employment, fall within the remit of UK government policy, more targeted measures could be

implemented to incentivize engagement. One specific intervention suggested by trade union and skilled practitioner interviewees is to embed apprenticeship guarantees within government procurement processes and enhance oversight to ensure compliance.

While Bredgaard's framework provided a valuable foundation, data revealed a limitation, in that the typology offers only a static snapshot of engagement, whereas employer attitudes and participation in apprenticeships are inherently dynamic and subject to change over time. To address this, a refined version of the typology is proposed, one that captures shifts in employer behavior and movement across categories, thereby enhancing understanding of the structural factors, causal mechanisms and internal motivators shaping employer decision-making.

DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgement

None.

Author contributions

Quigley P: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Source of funding

This research paper was derived from a PhD that was jointly funded by the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science and Skills Development Scotland.

Ethical approval

The study protocol was approved by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

REFERENCES

- Bredgaard, T. (2017). Employers and active labour market policies: typologies and evidence. *Social Policy and Society*, 17(3), 1-13. DOI:10.1017/S147474641700015X.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- Fletcher, A. J. (2017). Applying critical realism in qualitative research:

- methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(2), 181-194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401>
- Fortwengel, J., Gospel, H., & Toner, P. (2021). Varieties of institutional renewal: the case of apprenticeship in the US, England, and Australia. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 73(1), 71-94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2019.1688855>
- Industrial Facts and Forecasting. (2022, May 21). Scottish Employer Perspectives Survey. Scottish Government. Retrieved May 28, 2022, from <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-employer-perspectives-survey-2021-2/>
- International Labour Organization. (2023, June 5). Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation, 2023. International Labour Organization. Retrieved November 4, 2023, from https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R208
- Richmond, T. (2020, March 1). Runaway Training. EDSK. Retrieved January 15, 2021, from www.edsk.org
- Schultz, T. (1961). Investment in Human Capital. *The American Economic Review*, 51(1), 1-17.
- Skills Development Scotland. (2020). *Apprenticeship Employer Survey 2020*. Skills Development Scotland.
- Skills Development Scotland. (2022). *Modern Apprenticeship Statistics. For the Full Financial Year 2021/22*. Skills Development Scotland.