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The Role of Key Influencers for Young Adults Choosing the Apprenticeship Pathway to the World of Work

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Abstract

Young adults' transitions from schooling to work have been and continue to be an area of interest for researchers and policymakers alike. This study examines the role of key influencers in young adults' educational decision-making by investigating who the key influencers are and in what ways are they influencing young adults. The data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews. The findings indicate the key influences vary according to young adult's social circles. The role of institutions and institutional influencers was increased when young adult's social circle did not contain the needed information about apprenticeships and apprenticeship opportunities. Implications for policy and future research are discussed.

Keywords

transitions; apprenticeships; educational choice

1 Introduction

Young adults' transition from schooling to work have been a notable area of policy since the 2008 financial crisis. This topic is relevant for across Europe as nation states have been utilising different education and labour market policies to reduce youth unemployment, which often emphasise the VET pathway as is the case in Scotland (Parreira do Amaral, Kovacheva & Rambla, 2019; Scottish Government, 2014). The Covid-19 situation is not making the topic any less salient today as the disruption it has caused in the economy is again hitting employability as companies struggle for survival, reducing the hiring rates (Skills Development Scotland, 2020). For these reasons understanding young adults' decision-making and why they choose an apprenticeship is important for policymakers as well as researchers seeking to understand the processes behind the decision-making.

This study examines how young adults (16 – 25 years old) are influenced by other people – key influencers—as they are considering their education and training options after compulsory education. The data collection was conducted as part of MRes degree in 2018. The focus of the study is on role of influencers for young adults choosing to go to Modern Apprenticeship (MA) training in Scotland. This study is contributing to the academic debate about the effects of structural factors versus individual agency on young adults' educational decision making and their school-to-work transitions (Furlong, 2009), and it examines the added dimension of influencers as agents that exert some of the structural factor effects. This study seeks to contribute to that



discussion by examining the variety of ways different people in young adults' lives contribute to their decision-making and how different institutional influencers – such as careers advisors – are a part of the mix of influences that affect young adults' educational choices.

Influencers are defined in the study as people who interact with young adults and affect their decision-making in various ways. Key influencers are the people who have the greatest influence on young adults. Key influencers can be part of young adults' social networks (for example family members, friends, and other relatives), or they could be individuals fulfilling an institutional role as they interact with young adults (for example teachers and careers advisors). These two types of influencers are categorised as personal and institutional influencers respectively. The forms of influence include expressions of support regarding young adults' choices, providing information for decision-making, promising and providing practical support in the application process, and linking young people with possible opportunities for apprenticeships. The project concerns the following research questions:

- Who are the key influencers for young adults?
- How do the key influencers affect young adults' decision-making?

1.1 Agency and structure in educational decision-making

The academic debate in studies of school-to-work transitions and decision-making had for a long time been divided into two schools of thought; structuralists and individualists (Furlong, 2009). Structuralists have argued that structural factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity are the most significant factors affecting individuals' life courses, including educational choices (Furlong, 2009; Evans, 2002). These effects have been argued to stem from the restricting effects caused by the lack of resources among those in lower socioeconomic classes and cultural learning effects. The mechanics for the structural effects have been often studied utilising Bourdesian frameworks (Atkinson, 2010;2017), where the socioeconomic status (SES) provides an environment where a young person grows up, and where they develop a habitus. The SES also comes with a differing amount of economic capital, and variants of social and cultural capital, as the social learning environments and social circles vary largely on the basis of SES (Atkinson, 2010; 2017).

On the other hand, individualists such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have argued that in post-industrial societies the effects social class have started to weaken. They have argued that this has resulted in a societal condition where people need to create their identities through individual choices, rather than it being imposed, or handed down, through structures like socio-economic class. This view emphasises the individual agency as the most significant factor affecting one's life courses. This theoretical perspective emphasises the *need* for actively constructing one's identity due to weakened societal structures (Roberts, 2009). This results in a condition where individual responsibility for one's social standing and career choices is emphasised.

Studies have emerged from this debate examining how structural factors affect individuals' decision-making and how they might restrict or limit personal agency. The interaction between structural and agential factors is one of the developing areas of research in the field. One term for restriction of agency through structural factors is 'bounded agency' (Evans, 2002) and it is forming the theoretical framework in which this study is situated. The concept of bounded agency is useful for it elegantly expresses the constraining effects of SES and other structural factors to an individual who occupies a social environment where individual is responsible for, and is forced to make decisions about, their career and life trajectories.

1.2 The Scottish policy context

The Scottish education and labour policy context is one where the focus is on providing the needed tools for young adults' educational decision-making. The flagship policy in this area at the time of data collection and writing is called *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW; Scottish Government, 2014). The policy is a broad policy addressing various perceived issues in Scottish vocational education and transitions from schooling to vocational education (Scottish Government, 2014). The aspects of the policy most relevant for this study were to do with apprenticeships and career guidance.

The first relevant part was the creation of an apprenticeship pathway that started earlier and could be accessed while in school. This started off as 'pathfinder' project in DYW documentation and over its implementation it became a work-based learning option in Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* called Foundation Apprenticeships (Scottish Government, 2018) The Foundation apprenticeship expanded the apprenticeship pathway from the start and it was coupled with a set of more advanced graduate level apprenticeship frameworks under the title of Graduate Apprenticeships to extend the apprenticeship pathway further into higher levels of qualifications (Scottish Government, 2014).

The second relevant part for this study involved improvements to career services offered to young adults. This involved creating partnerships with employers in the areas around schools. One of the reasons for the creation of these partnerships was to improve visibility of local industries and different jobs in school (Scottish Government, 2014). These partnerships with local industry seek to broaden the amount options that are visible for young adults while they are in school and to expose the young adults to more career options before they have to make decisions (Scottish Government, 2014; 2018). One of the aspects of the study was to see if these efforts to make different apprenticeships and college options more visible in school have been noticed by young adults themselves and if careers advisors providing the information services are viewed as key influencers and supporters.

2 Methodology

This study uses qualitative case-study methodology as it is well suited for gaining insight into a specific phenomenon or how people belonging to a group think (Alasuutari et al., 2008). Data used in the study comes from Semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview technique was used as it is a well-established tool for understanding people's views, thinking, and personal experiences about a specific topic while allowing for some flexibility to pursue unexpected strands in enquiry. (Howard & Berg, 2017; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews were one-to-one and conducted either in person or via video calling software Skype. Each interview lasted between 20 and 35 minutes. Interviews were transcribed by the research and analysed using thematic analysis. The coding was done using R Qualitative Data Analysis (RQDA) software package in R (Huang, 2016). The themes coded in the analysis were a combination of pre-determined themes derived from the research questions and focus, as well as themes that emerged from the coding process and were not anticipated prior to the analysis.

To be eligible for the study, the participants had to be between 16 and 25 years old and either doing a Modern Apprenticeship (MA) or having just completed one at the time of the interviews. The sample of the study consisted of 10 young adults (19 to 23 years old at the time of the interviews) who were all completing their apprenticeships in a single organisation. However, while the participants were all doing their apprenticeship in the same organisation, they were based in different locations across Scotland. The participants were completing two different kinds of MAs. First of the two MAs was situated in the area of youth support and career development, while the second type of MA was in the area of Business and Administration. The MAs in the study were of at least SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework) level 5, making them fall within the qualification level that the Scottish *Developing the Young*

Workforce policy aimed to increase in ratio compared to lower level qualifications (Scottish Government, 2014). Any references made to the participants are done using pseudonyms. The data for the study was collected in 2018 as part of an MRes degree dissertation.

3 Results and Discussion

The results of the study are covered in this section. The findings part describes the findings to the research questions as well as additional themes picked up during the analysis. The implications of the findings are discussed in the following part, focusing on what the results suggest for policy in Scotland and for other places with similar policy approaches.

3.1 Findings

RQ1) Who are they key influencers for young adults?

The key influencers for the participants showed a notable variance from person to person in the study, but the influencers could be divided into three groups. These groups of key influencers for choosing to go into a Modern Apprenticeship (MA) training were careers advisors, parents and relatives, or peers. The variance in key influencers' roles appears to stem primarily from the forms of influence and support contained within the young adult's social circle, containing both 'parents and relatives' as well as the 'peers' groups. In some instances the young adult had the necessary information and support within their personal social circle, in which case the influencers with institutional roles played a smaller part. Of the influencers in young adult's social circle parents were usually the key influencer, but sometimes they did not have the resources that the young adult needed to make the decision, such as information about career opportunities or knowledge about apprenticeships. In these cases other people within the social circle with relevant information were more prominent as influencers, or their place was taken by influencers with an institutional role.

...one of my dad's friends. Who was actually an intern here. She said to me that I should consider it. (Jack)

The influence was not always direct, as in the influencer in person providing information, assistance, or even just a person to talk to about educational choices. Sometimes the influence was indirect, taking a form of providing resources that the young adult could utilise on their own if they chose to do so. This distinction will be discussed in the section below, but it is notable that this indirect assistance was most often provided by institutional influencers, especially careers advisors. The institutional influencers were viewed to provide the basic information about apprenticeships and some of the options, but the information from them was often seen as being limited and directed towards certain options. The factor dictating which options were emphasised for the young adult in school appears to have been grades, resulting in those with good grades being directed towards university and little attention being given towards other possibilities. In instances when other options such as apprenticeships came up in school, the presented selection was limited.

In terms of when I was coming up to leaving school, I got the impression that maybe if you had a certain level of education that you were almost expected to go to university. (Margaret)

When I was at school they were quite erm, talked about the sort of construction industry, the modern apprenticeship. I think it was the beginning of like the NHS

having modern apprenticeships. And sort of your usual hairdresser ones and stuff as well. (Helen)

For this reason, and for the fact that contact time with careers advisors in schools is limited, the careers guidance in schools was found to be lacking for many in the sample despite being named most consistently as a source for information about apprenticeships. However, some of the participants had gone to careers services outside schooling, usually after deciding that university or college was not right for them, and these careers services were found to be more useful.

RQ2) How do the key influencers affect young adults' decision-making?

The main forms of influence were identified from the interviewees and coded into four different categories, which were 1) information provision, 2) expressions of support and affirmation, 3) practical support, and 4) apprenticeship opportunity linkages. These forms of influence were not exerted solely by any single type of key influencer. Instead, there was variation from case to case and multiple influencers could provide the same form of influence, as was indicated earlier. However, most common source of information that influenced the young adults' choice to go into MA training came from schools and careers advisors specifically. Careers advisors were attributed to providing the tools that the young adults used in their self-driven search for jobs and apprenticeships, which increased their importance as information and tool providers as they enabled more efficient self-driven search for information and opportunities.

This is where—you know, after registering at the 'my world of work' website that—that I found there was other avenues and it wasn't just—cause it was mainly construction—I would say that's cool. (Steven)

In some cases, the information about apprenticeships and different MA options came from their personal social networks, which included parents, peers and relatives. This was the case where the parents were aware of apprenticeship opportunities in the field they were working on, or if they had done apprenticeship training themselves.

But it's all about using your networks at the end of the day so. I did just that. (Alex)

In these instances the role of institutional influencers was smaller, mostly providing information about application and job search tools. Personal social networks were also the providers of practical and emotional support for young adults, as well as a person to discuss ideas for options with for the young adults in the sample. These discussions with peers and parents ended up supporting the initial idea of the young adult to apply to an apprenticeship.

Family was a big one. So obviously talked it through with them. ... Erm, got some feedback that I should be going for it. (Helen)

Even within the limited sample captured a significant amount of variation in young adults' journeys to apprenticeships and in motivations for applying to an apprenticeship. The journey was not always a straightforward transition from compulsory schooling to a modern apprenticeship. Instead, many in the sample had gone to university, college, or straight to work after schooling but were not happy with their experiences. This dissatisfaction resulted in them seeking other options and led to them finding a suitable apprenticeship option for themselves.

Another factor that emerged as important for the availability of options was the geographic location of the young adult. Some participants had the impression that their location did not

offer the breadth of options that were available near the larger population centres of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Possibly in my area it's a bit more rare for these types of apprenticeships to come up so I wonder if that maybe contributed to not being as aware of different kinds of apprenticeships. (Margaret)

Besides the two research questions outlined above, the study also examined why young adults chose to do an apprenticeship and what their journey into an apprenticeship was like. The motivations for choosing an apprenticeship was varied even in the sample with only two apprenticeship frameworks. Most participants had a mix of motivations and some of them were viewed to be more central than others. First type of motivator was a financial one. Apprenticeship was perceived to be a good choice financially as one did not have to go into debt to get an education and the 'earn while you learn' aspect of an apprenticeship was appreciated.

Erm, it's just money to be honest. (Jack)

For others the primary motivations had more to do with the form or training, location, or aiming for a job where they would feel fulfilled. These motivations were more common than the financial motivations. This suggests that the format of learning in an apprenticeship and the careers available through an MA are significant factors in attracting young adults to apprenticeships besides the 'earn and learn' aspect which was attractive to many. The support and structured work-based learning was viewed as a large benefit over applying for a job without the apprenticeship component.

I thought, if I'm getting paid then that's basically... it's a full-time job, you're getting trained, it's comfortable. Like I wouldn't be comfortable jumping into something that I would have to learn like within a week. Whereas within MA you learn in two years. (Jack)

3.2 Discussion

The findings outlined above have some implications for the importance of different influencers and the conditions when the different influencers occupy a key role. One of the main findings was that there is substantial variation in which influencers provide the different kinds of influence for young adults. However, the finding that institutional influencers (careers advisors and teachers) were the most common sources of information-based influence has implications for the role of careers services. The role of careers advisors in Scottish DYW policy is to provide the information that young adults need for making career choices (Scottish Government, 2014). The findings suggest that the career advisors occupy this role and that they are the 'baseline' provider for the information, i.e. the key source for information when personal influencers from young adult's social circle do not have the information that the young adult seeks.

However, the critiques of the careers guidance in schools indicate that the guidance given to the young people can be overly restricted in the limited amount of contact time and when grades are used as the guiding factor for options that are discussed during the meetings. This indicates that 'better information' if construed as more personalised and with more contact time even for those that are not viewed most at risk could improve the usefulness of the careers guidance in school. The motivations of the participants varied substantially in the sample, so the task for the careers advisors to use them as a starting point for a broader range of suggested options might not be easy, but it might make the offered support more relevant when these factors take a centre stage instead of grades.

The study also has implications for the debate about structural and agency factors, and the findings generally support the bounded agency theoretical approach (Evans, 2002). The motivations for young adults to choose an apprenticeship were varied, but they were driven by personal preferences of the young adult. These motivations were either about pursuing preferred fields, making money while gaining qualifications, or other factors outlined earlier.

This study cannot provide answer for if and how the preferences are shaped by structural factors as the focus is different from studies like those conducted by Atkinson (2017), but some of the journeys by young adults provide a good indication of the constraining effects of structural factors to young adults' decision-making. These journeys were those people's who had chosen to go to a university or a college after school, but had not enjoyed their experiences. Changed after further discussion with careers advisors, sometimes outwith school, or after using self-guided online resources.

After the young adults gained more information about different apprenticeship. In these instances the impression about apprenticeships these young adults had was limited to just few fields that did not interest them. This impression about apprenticeships c frameworks and found a field of interest they started considering an apprenticeship option for themselves. This provides support for the limited window of options that is considered by a young adult based on their impressions of the different options available to them. Having accurate and relevant information available to the young adults thus appears to open the window of considered options and potentially make it more likely that the first option chosen after schooling is a satisfactory one for the young adult.

Going beyond careers advisors, the impression about apprenticeships in schools more generally was limited and lacking. Apprenticeships were perceived to be limited to fields such as construction and hairdressing partially as those fields were shown as examples of apprenticeships, and other fields did not get the attention as it was colleges and especially universities that were portrayed as the desirable options. This was especially true if one had good grades. It could be that the policy aims in DYW had not yet translated into actions in schools when the data for the study was collected, but the findings support earlier findings in UK that there is a perceived prestige disparity between apprenticeships and higher education (Brockman & Laurie, 2016).

The Learner Journey Review (Scottish Government, 2018), some of the same issues as the findings above and it appears that making careers advice more personalised is one of the central aims going forward. This involves making the support start earlier, making it a longer term support and shifting the focus more towards personal interests rather than focusing on grades. These changes are in line with the findings of the study.

The limitations of this study include the limited scope of the study as the sample for the study is small. This means that while the data gained from the interviews is rich, the view is narrow and the experiences of the participants in this study might not be the experiences of apprentices in other fields for example. Additionally, the study is focused in the young adults' views and does not examine the views of the influencers, which would be important in understanding why some influencers become key influencers and what their aims are. Future studies conducted by the researcher in his PhD research seek to address these weaknesses. The sample in the PhD study is going to be larger and will contain data from the influencers as well as the young adults in order to better understand how the influencers affect young adults' decision-making and what the aims, attitudes, and information levels of the influencers are when they are supporting young adults.

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Biographical notes

Petri Simonen is a PhD student in University of Glasgow. His research examines the role of influencers in young adults' educational decision-making.