WES Apprentice Snapshot 2026

Supporting women have fulfilling careers in engineering

Photo credit: This is Engineering © Heriot-Watt University

wes

women's engineering society

Foreword

Every year as we step into National Apprenticeship Week and look ahead to Scottish Apprenticeship Week, we are reminded that engineering has always been a discipline powered by intelligence in its broadest sense. Not just technical intelligence, but human intelligence, safety intelligence and cultural intelligence. The intelligence that emerges when people with different perspectives, backgrounds, and lived experiences come together to solve problems that matter.

In the last quarter of 2025, we invited our apprentices to give us a grounded, experience-led view of apprenticeship life. They've shared their pride, their challenges, their ambitions and their hopes for the future of the profession and their role within. What emerges is a clear picture of a growing community of apprentices who are ably learning the craft of engineering whilst also redefining what it means to belong in the engineering industry.

Their experiences are honest and varied. Encouragingly many describe supportive workplaces where they feel safe, included, and able to grow. Others, however, highlight the quiet, persistent barriers that still shape women's journeys.

What stands out most is their resilience and ambition. These apprentices are leading outreach programmes, chairing networks, excelling academically, and taking on leadership responsibilities. They are building confidence, finding their voice and stepping up as role models for those girls and women who are coming up behind them.

We've structured the report to serve as a call to action based on the findings. Employers, universities, and training providers all have a role to play in strengthening the pathways into engineering: in making them clearer, fairer, and more supportive for everyone (including women) to be able to contribute successfully to the engineering economy though an apprenticeship.

Thank you to those apprentices who contributed to this report. Our commitment is to champion your voices and ensure that the systems around you evolve with the same intelligence, ambition, and courage that you show every day.

Susan Robson
Chief Executive
Women's Engineering Society (WES)

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Executive Summary

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Insights from our WES Apprentices[1]

This report brings together insights from our apprentices at WES, offering their collective view of what is working well, where support structures need strengthening, and how apprenticeships can better enable women to thrive in engineering. The findings reveal a cohort that is motivated, resilient, and ambitious. Yet these women are still navigating structural challenges that affect their chances of having a fulfilling career in engineering.

Our apprentices describe their overall experience as broadly positive, with many feeling hopeful about their future in engineering. Confidence is often rooted in supportive colleagues, meaningful project exposure, and visible opportunities to grow. But they also recognise that there are challenges for anyone taking on an Apprenticeship: workload, learning curves, and navigating new environments. However, women are still experiencing additional challenges that hamper their ability to perform at their best, and these are disappointingly familiar: being taken seriously, managing stereotype-based doubt, and the emotional labour of proving competence. These early reflections set the tone for a journey that is both rewarding and demanding.

Most of our apprentices feel reasonably well integrated between academic study and workplace learning, though the quality of this integration varies. Strong onboarding experiences help apprentices settle quickly, but where induction is inconsistent, confidence can dip early. Our apprentices value clear expectations, structured support, and alignment

[1] All graphs in this document are presented as percentage of respondents to the question. Respondents are a mix of WES apprentices and WES apprentice supporters

between academic content and workplace practice, and when these elements are present, the apprenticeship feels coherent. When absent, apprentices can feel pulled between two systems that don't fully understand each other.

Navigating assessment, progression and milestones is one of the most complex areas of the apprenticeship experience. While some of our apprentices feel confident about their End Point Assessment, others remain uncertain, often due to limited visibility of expectations or inconsistent communication. This is compounded by the fact that awareness of the recent assessment changes made in 2025 is mixed and the majority of our apprentices noting that they had received no guidance on how they could leverage prior learning recognition and accelerated pathways. Many are also unsure about job security and professional registration routes post apprenticeship. Despite these gaps, our apprentices overwhelmingly feel their apprenticeship is preparing them well for future engineering roles and the key milestones of technical achievements, academic deadlines, and workplace transitions viewed as both challenging and formative.

Workplace culture emerges as a strong positive theme with our apprentices consistently reporting that they feel safe and included. Supportive teams, respectful colleagues, and inclusive environments contribute to this sense of belonging. However, practical inclusion issues persist in areas such as PPE fit, with half of apprentices receiving equipment that does not fit properly which hints at cultures that make our apprentices feel safe without necessarily keeping them safe. Timely issue-resolution, strong managerial support, and clear communication were highlighted as key contributors for environments where our women feel valued, respected, and able to contribute fully.

Universities and colleges are generally seen as supportive, with the majority of apprentices reporting at least some level of academic guidance. However, support is heavily weighted toward academic tutoring, with limited visibility of pastoral, wellbeing, or career-focused support. Our apprentices are divided on whether their institution understands the realities of workplace life, and many experience challenges balancing academic and workplace demands. This tension underscores the need for stronger employer–university coordination and more holistic support (which may come from third sector networks such as the Women's Engineering Society) that recognises the dual pressures apprentices face.

Our apprentices express clear priorities for future development opportunities. They want practical, confidence-building content, particularly around assessment navigation, career pathways, leadership and wellbeing. Skills workshops are the most preferred format reflect a desire for interactive, relational learning experiences that build confidence, clarity, and community.

Our apprentices want employers and educators to understand the realities of being a woman in engineering: the need to be taken seriously, the pressure to prove competence, the impact of bias, and the importance of respect and inclusion. They also share deep pride in their achievements. These stories highlight the extraordinary contribution women apprentices are already making to the engineering sector.

The majority of our apprentices are thriving not because the system is perfect, but because they are determined, capable, and committed. Their experiences shows that apprenticeships are a powerful route into engineering, offering real technical development and meaningful opportunities for personal transformation. At the same time, the findings highlight clear opportunities to strengthen this pathway into engineering to ensure that apprentices and businesses alike get the best out of their engineering apprenticeships. And by doing so women apprentices not only succeed but shape the future of the engineering economy.

"I'd like employers and training providers to understand that women apprentices thrive when we feel genuinely included and supported. Simple actions like having mentors, clear communication, and a culture of respect make a huge difference.

My experience has shown me that inclusion isn't just about opportunity. It's about ensuring everyone feels they belong."

Maleeha Patel
WES Apprentice Board and
Apprentice Amazon RME

Overall experience

This opening section captures apprentices' broad reflections on their journey so far: how they feel, what's helped them stay hopeful, and the early challenges they've encountered. It sets the tone for understanding both the emotional and practical foundations of their apprenticeship experience.

How would you describe your overall experience so far?

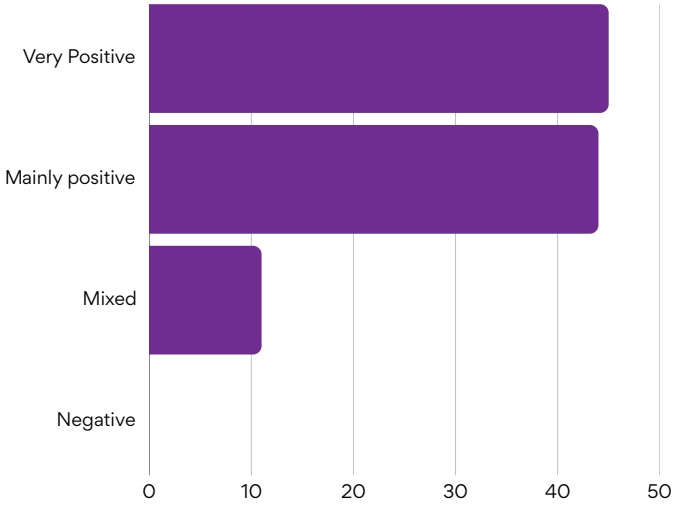

Photo credit: This is Engineering © Rolls-Royce PLC

The responses paint a picture of apprentices who are on the whole having a genuinely positive experience. This gives us a strong foundation to build on for retention, long-term confidence and career development.

The fact that there is a minority for whom the experience has been "mixed" sends out a useful signal rather than a concern. It reminds us that even in a broadly supportive system individual friction points still exist, whether around workload, clarity of expectations, or a sense of belonging. Understanding those nuances matters.

This strong baseline provides an opportunity to understand why apprentices feel positive: what's working, what's contributing to their confidence, and what elements of their experience are making the biggest difference. These insights will help WES and our partners strengthen what's already working and replicate it more widely.

It's a positive story, and one that points clearly to where thoughtful improvements can make it even stronger.

What has helped you feel hopeful about your future in engineering?

Our apprentices identified a wide range of factors that contribute to their confidence and optimism about their engineering futures. These can be grouped into four clear thematic drivers:

Supportive people and networks. This is the strongest and most consistent theme across responses, and whether through colleagues, affinity groups, or WES networks, our apprentices told us that they play a critical role in their confidence. This highlights the importance of belonging, psychological safety, and visible communities for early-career engineers. This reinforces the need for and impact of the community-building work we are doing at WES and how it is directly contributing to confidence and retention of our Apprentice community.

Meaningful work and hands-on experience. Apprentices referenced hands-on experience as a key driver of confidence. Practical, real-world engineering work helps apprentices feel capable, trusted, and professionally grounded. It reinforces that they are developing relevant skills and contributing to something tangible. Employers who offer structured project exposure and varied placements build the strongest confidence in their apprentices and WES could do more to showcase best practice to a wider audience – checking that the best practice was applicable in both corporate and SME areas of the engineering economy.

Positive career prospects and future opportunities. Some apprentices explicitly referenced their future opportunities, specifically for employment and networking. Confidence is strengthened when apprentices can see a future for themselves both in their organisation and in the wider engineering sector. Optimism about the industry's trajectory also plays a role. Employers who communicate progression pathways clearly are unsurprising likely to see stronger apprentice confidence and retention.

A strong sense of purpose and passion for engineering. A smaller but important theme is intrinsic motivation.

"I enjoy engineering and learning about how to make things work so that one day I can help people."

For some of our apprentices, confidence is rooted in personal values but also curiosity, problem-solving, and the desire to make a difference are powerful long-term motivators. Narratives that connect engineering to societal impact may further strengthen this sense of purpose, which is something we do at WES to tap into new talent pools and something the industry must do to meet the growing demand for engineering talent.

The responses paint a picture of apprentices who feel supported by people around them, who are engaged in meaningful engineering work, who are optimistic about their future prospects and who are connected to a sense of purpose. These are strong indicators of a healthy early-career environment.

Have you experienced any challenges?

Across the responses, our apprentices described a set of challenges that are both widespread and predictable. Some challenges result from the structure of the apprenticeship model, others deeply shaped by gendered dynamics in engineering. Together, they reveal a landscape where women apprentices are working hard, adapting constantly, and navigating pressures that go far beyond technical learning.

Balancing work, study, and personal life. This was the most dominant theme. Apprentices spoke about the strain of holding down a full-time job while keeping up with academic assignments, exams, and independent learning. These pressures are not about poor organisation but stem from the structural tension of being both an employee and a student, often without protected study time or aligned expectations across teams. Apprentices are coping but they are carrying more than we often acknowledge. Better coordination between employers and educators, clearer guidance, and dedicated academic time would make a meaningful difference.

Knowledge gaps, confidence barriers, and early-career vulnerability. Many apprentices described the pressure of being new to engineering and the expectation that they should "know everything straight away," the fear of asking questions, and moments of being quietly undermined. Early-career confidence is fragile, and without psychological safety, normal learning curves can quickly turn into self-doubt. Managers and teams play a crucial role in creating environments where questions are welcomed and being a beginner is treated as normal.

Unequal access to opportunities and development. Several apprentices felt they were not given the same opportunities as male peers or that graduates and industry students were prioritised. Some described noticing that graduates were prioritised for development, which reflects a cultural hierarchy that still exists in parts of the sector. Being both junior and a woman can create a double disadvantage. Transparent criteria for placements, training, and development help counteract these imbalances. When apprentices feel genuinely invested in, confidence and progression accelerate and organisations benefit.

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Navigating unclear processes and inconsistent expectations. Our apprentices highlighted confusion around organisational processes and in particular the inconsistent interpretations of “off-the-job” requirements and colleagues who didn’t fully understand the complexity of the apprenticeship. These inconsistencies create friction and unnecessary stress. Clearer internal communication and better manager training would help ensure apprentices are supported consistently and fairly.

Transition and early-career adjustment. Some of our apprentices described the personal challenges of starting an engineering career, including relocating, feeling lost, or trying to maintain a healthy balance between work, study, and social life. These are the human demands of entering a new profession, often at a young age and without a ready-made support network. Mentoring, pastoral care, and peer communities can make a significant difference and are accessible through the Women’s Engineering Society. If our apprentices are not readily using them, we need to communicate the offering and benefits more clearly to this segment of our engineering workforce.

Gender imbalance and visibility pressure. Many described the experience of being the only woman, or one of very few, in their team. Under-representation creates a visibility burden: doing the same job while managing the sense of being watched, judged, or expected to “represent all women.” Even well-intentioned teams can feel isolating if inclusion isn’t actively practised.

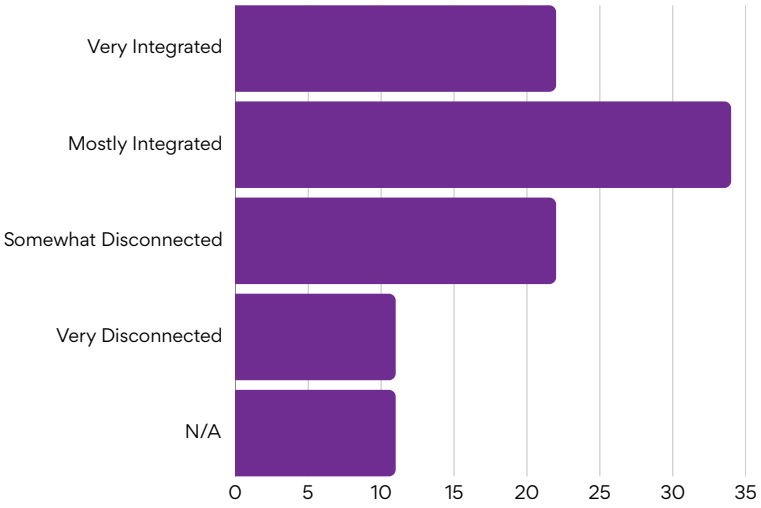
Cultural discomfort and inappropriate environments. Some of our apprentices described discomfort in male-dominated or traditional environments: from intimidating team cultures to practical issues like trying on PPE in mixed-gender spaces. A few referenced experiencing sexist or inappropriate comments. These experiences highlight gaps not only in behaviour but in physical spaces, processes, and everyday norms that signal who belongs.

Across both general and gender-specific themes, a clear pattern emerges that the challenges women apprentices face are systemic, predictable, and solvable. Many stem from structural tensions in the apprenticeship model whilst others reflect persistent gendered dynamics in engineering such as under-representation, subtle bias, uneven access to opportunities, and gaps in psychological safety. However, positive environments do exist, and they show what is possible when inclusion is intentional and support is well-structured.

Integration between learning and work

This section examines how well apprenticeships bridge academic learning with workplace practice. It looks at induction, early support, and the extent to which apprentices feel their two learning environments connect and reinforce each other.

How well integrated do you feel between your academic and workplace learning?



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Our apprentices described very different experiences of integration, ranging from feeling fully part of their organisation to feeling quite disconnected from it. This shows a mixed picture, but one that leans positive. It's a reminder that while many apprentices are finding their place and feeling part of their teams, others are still on the margins; and understanding that variation is key to improving the experience for everyone.

Integration is far from consistent. Some apprentices feel their academic learning and workplace experience fit together well, while others describe a much looser connection. What this tells us is that integration isn't guaranteed by the apprenticeship model itself but depends heavily on local factors. The understanding of individual line managers, the structure of placements, the communication between employers and universities, and the nature of the apprentice's role all shape how well the two sides of the programme fit together.

When integration works, it works well. Apprentices who feel connected to both sides of their programme often benefit from clear alignment between academic modules and workplace tasks, between managers who understand the academic requirements and structured placements, and between good communication between employer and training provider. This kind of alignment builds confidence, accelerates learning, and helps apprentices see the relevance of their studies.

The experiences of those who feel disconnected are equally important. For them, workplace tasks may bear little relation to their academic content, protected study time may be limited, and managers may not fully understand the demands of a degree-level apprenticeship. That disconnection can create stress, weaken academic performance, and make it harder to build a strong sense of professional identity, particularly for women, who are already navigating under-representation and confidence pressures.

Taken together, the responses paint a picture of uneven integration shaped more by local culture and communication than by the apprenticeship structure itself. For women apprentices in engineering, strengthening this alignment is about educational improvement and a meaningful step toward inclusion, confidence, and long-term retention.

Navigating assessment, progression and milestones

In this section we explore our apprentices' understanding of the formal structure of their programme: gateway, assessment changes, progression clarity, End Point Assessment, and the milestones that have shaped their journey. This section highlights elements that are strong, but also where uncertainty remains.

How well supported did you feel during your onboarding or induction phase?

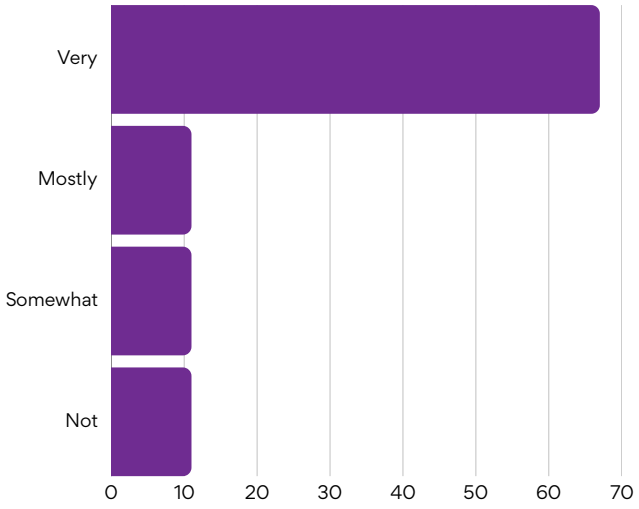


Photo credit: © This is Engineering

The results suggest that the early stages of our apprentices' programmes are generally working well. For many, those first weeks and months provided enough structure, information, and encouragement to build confidence and help them settle into their roles. It's a positive sign of organisational readiness and of teams that understand the importance of a strong start.

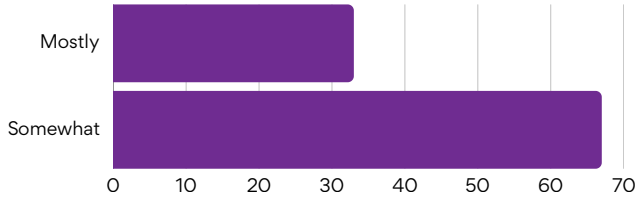
But the picture isn't entirely uniform. Some apprentices felt less supported, and those experiences matter. They point to inconsistencies that often come down to local factors: the team an apprentice joins, the manager they report to, or the placement environment they land in. Even a single unsupported apprentice is a reminder that onboarding quality can vary more than organisations realise.

As women, our apprentices are more likely to face under-representation, confidence pressures, and subtle forms of exclusion in their earliest stages. For them, onboarding is a critical moment that can either ease feelings of self-doubt or amplify them. A strong induction builds belonging. A weak one can leave women feeling isolated before they've even begun.

The "mostly supported" responses signal room for improvement. It is likely to reflect cases of good initial information but fewer ongoing check-ins, supportive individuals but uneven processes, or a solid orientation without much clarity on expectations or progression. There's an opportunity here to shift onboarding from functional to exceptional through structured follow-up, mentoring, and early-career networks that help apprentices feel fully anchored.

Overall, the data show a broadly positive onboarding experience, but one that varies across teams and placements. For women apprentices in engineering, ensuring that support is consistent, inclusive, and sustained is essential for building confidence, belonging, and long-term stability in the profession.

How confident do you feel about your End-Point Assessment (EPA)?



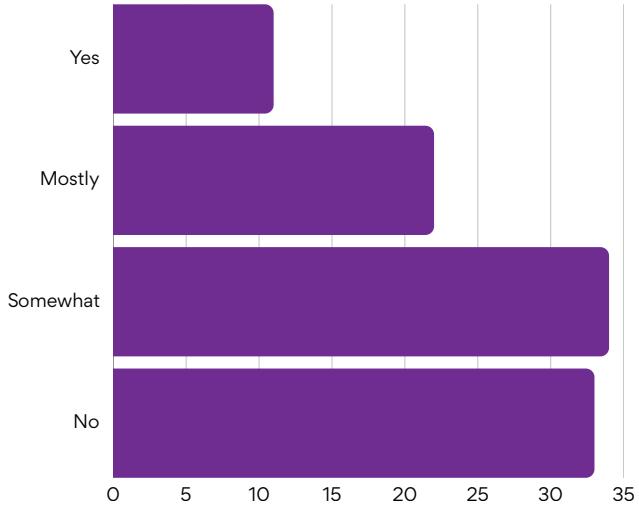
For our apprentices approaching their EPA it is clear that confidence isn't fully formed yet and our apprentices are still building their skills, understanding what's expected of them, and getting a sense of their readiness. This makes it a critical moment to strengthen support before they move into the assessment phase.

The picture is a mixed with a notable absence of full confidence, suggesting that some apprentices may not yet feel fully prepared or may lack clarity about what EPA involves. Clear guidance, structured preparation, and space to ask questions without judgement could make a meaningful difference.

The responses also point to practical issues. Limited visibility of EPA requirements, inconsistent preparation, uneven communication between employers and training providers, and the natural anxiety that comes with assessment. These are all solvable. Early, proactive support through EPA-focused workshops, mentoring, or peer networks could shift apprentices from uncertainty to confidence.

Overall, the data show that for our apprentices who are at gateway, confidence is mixed. Uncertainty is more common than strong confidence, and gendered confidence dynamics may be shaping how women apprentices perceive their readiness. This is a clear opportunity to strengthen EPA preparation in ways that support both competence and inclusion.

Have you received guidance on what happens after your apprenticeship ends?



Our apprentices described a mixed and often inconsistent experience of receiving guidance about what comes after their apprenticeship.

Uncertainty stems from inconsistent communication. Many apprentices still lack a clear picture of the roles they might move into, how progression decisions are made, what professional registration routes look like, or what support will be available once they complete their programme. This is a sign that post-apprenticeship pathways aren't being communicated systematically across organisations. And when clarity is missing, confidence and motivation can suffer.

Some apprentices feel well informed. Their experiences point to what good practice looks like: clear progression frameworks, early conversations about future roles, visible examples of successful transitions, and supportive managers or HR teams who make the next steps feel tangible. These pockets of strong guidance offer a useful blueprint for improving consistency across the wider cohort.

Glimpses of information are helpful but not enough to feel secure. This is often the result of informal conversations, unclear timelines, uncertainty about job availability, or limited visibility of professional registration pathways. Partial clarity can be almost as stressful as none at all, leaving apprentices feeling as though they should know more than they do. Structured, transparent communication is essential to closing that gap.

Overall, the data highlight a significant gap in how clearly apprentices understand their future options. This is a critical area for improvement, as clarity about future roles is strongly linked to retention, motivation, and long-term career confidence.

What milestone has felt most significant or challenging?

The milestones described by apprentices span academic achievements, workplace transitions, personal breakthroughs, and major career shifts. These responses reflect a cohort navigating both the structural demands of engineering apprenticeships and the personal growth required to thrive in a male-dominated sector.

Academic progression and qualification milestones. Academic achievements featured strongly. Several apprentices spoke about passing each year, completing modules, moving from an HND to a degree top-up, or finishing a PhD. These moments clearly carry weight. For many women in engineering, academic success is a source of validation in environments where stereotype-based doubt can still linger.

Transitioning into the workplace or new environments. Moving from college or university into engineering settings, stepping onto site for the first time, or thinking ahead to securing a job after the apprenticeship all came through as significant turning points. These transitions are both exciting and demanding, particularly in male-dominated environments where women may feel highly visible or scrutinised. Structured onboarding, mentoring, and early-career support can make these moments feel far more navigable.

Developing technical capability and confidence. Technical achievements also stood out. Some apprentices described the pride of completing a complex engineering task independently or gaining access to more advanced opportunities as they progressed. These experiences are powerful confidence drivers. They help apprentices feel anchored as engineers in terms of their capability and belonging.

Major personal or career transitions. Completing career shifts such as moving from one engineering sector to another through an apprenticeship felt like a transformative step. Career changers often bring rich strengths but may also face heightened lack of confidence, especially in fields where traditional pathways dominate. Tailored support can help them integrate and thrive.

Taken together, the milestones described reflect a cohort experiencing pride in academic achievement, growth through workplace transitions, increasing technical confidence, and, for some, profound personal transformation. They also highlight the emotional labour involved in navigating engineering as a woman, particularly in the early stages of a career.

Are you aware of the recent changes to apprenticeship assessment[1]?

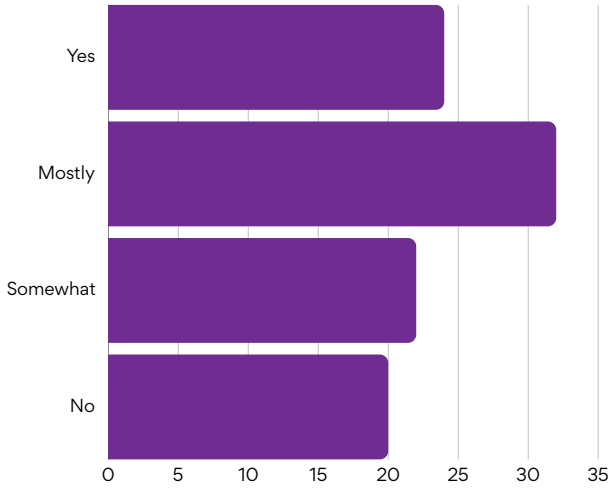
Only half of our apprentices[1] reported being aware of recent changes to apprenticeship assessment.

Awareness is inconsistent across the cohort. This signals that communication about assessment changes isn't reaching everyone consistently. The inconsistency appears to be shaped by local factors. Awareness seems to depend on how clearly training providers share updates, how proactive employers are in passing on information, how close apprentices are to gateway or EPA, and even the informal networks they have around them. Without a structured approach to communication, apprentices can easily feel unprepared or anxious as they move closer to assessment stages. When awareness is patchy, these existing pressures can intensify. Clear, proactive communication is a meaningful intervention in gender equity.

Half of our apprentices are unaware of recent assessment changes and for women apprentices, this uncertainty may compound existing confidence pressures. There is a clear opportunity to strengthen communication, improve transparency, and ensure apprentices feel informed and prepared throughout their journey.

[1] in England only. Not relevant for our apprentices in Scotland

Do you feel confident navigating your assessment and progression pathway?



Apprentices expressed a mixed level of confidence in navigating their assessment and progression pathways. In practice, just over half of the cohort feel broadly secure in their understanding, while nearly half are navigating some degree of uncertainty.

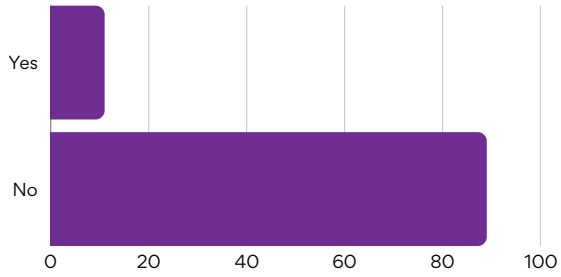
Confidence levels are split fairly evenly. The clear divide between apprentices who feel confident and those who do not suggests that confidence isn't shaped by the apprenticeship structure alone but is instead heavily influenced by the quality of local support, the clarity of communication, and the individual experiences apprentices have within their teams. When guidance varies, confidence becomes dependent on where an apprentice happens to be placed rather than on a consistent system.

"Mostly confident" reflects partial clarity rather than full assurance. The "mostly" response signals a general understanding of the pathway but lingering uncertainty about specific steps. Our apprentices appear to be coping, but not fully secure in their knowledge, often relying on informal conversations rather than structured guidance. With clearer communication and targeted clarification, many of them could easily move into the "yes" category.

A significant minority feel unsure or not confident. The responses point to meaningful gaps in understanding assessment requirements, visibility of progression routes, and confidence in navigating processes independently. Uncertainty at this stage can heighten anxiety, undermine motivation, and weaken long-term retention. These apprentices need clearer guidance and psychologically safe opportunities to ask questions without feeling exposed.

The data show a cohort with mixed confidence in navigating assessment and progression. Confidence appears uneven and highly dependent on local support, and gendered dynamics are likely influencing how secure women apprentices feel. Strengthening clarity, communication, and structured support in this area is critical, as confidence in progression pathways is closely tied to retention, performance, and long-term professional identity.

Have you received support or guidance around prior learning recognition or accelerated pathways?



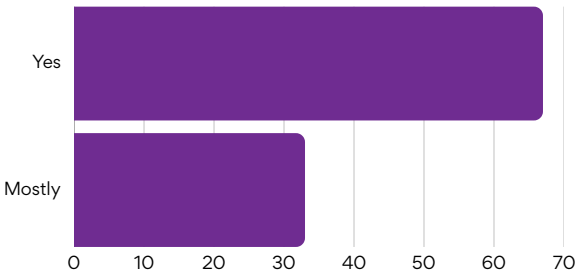
Across our apprentices there is very limited awareness of prior learning recognition or accelerated pathways.

A near-universal lack of guidance. The overwhelming message is that apprentices have not been informed about how their prior learning could be recognised, whether they might be eligible for acceleration, what evidence they would need, or how to navigate the process. This represents a significant gap in apprenticeship support. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a statutory requirement, yet most apprentices are unaware it exists. This suggests that employers and training providers are not consistently implementing or communicating RPL processes.

Missed opportunities for efficiency and progression. Without guidance on RPL or accelerated pathways, apprentices may end up repeating learning they already have, spending longer on the programme than necessary, or missing opportunities to progress more quickly. Some may also feel that their previous experience is being overlooked. This is likely to affect motivation, workload, and perceptions of fairness. Clear RPL processes could reduce unnecessary burden and improve the overall apprentice experience.

The data reveal a significant systemic gap. Almost all apprentices lack guidance on prior learning recognition, and this gap affects workload, progression, and perceived fairness. Women apprentices may be disproportionately impacted, and while isolated examples of good practice exist, they are not widespread. This is one of the clearest areas for improvement across the dataset and represents a major opportunity to strengthen both process and equity.

Do you feel your apprenticeship is preparing you for future roles in engineering?



Our apprentices expressed strong confidence that their apprenticeship is preparing them for future engineering roles. Every apprentice in our cohort feels positively about their readiness.

Universally positive sentiment. Every apprentice reported feeling either fully or mostly prepared. This is one of the strongest indicators of programme effectiveness across the dataset. Apprentices clearly feel they are gaining the skills, experience, and confidence they need to move into engineering roles. It suggests that employers and training providers are delivering development that is meaningful, relevant, and aligned with industry expectations.

Strong preparation despite earlier challenges. What makes this finding particularly striking is how it sits alongside other survey themes. Apprentices have reported mixed confidence navigating progression, inconsistent guidance on post-apprenticeship pathways, limited awareness of assessment changes, and gender-specific challenges in male-dominated environments. Yet despite these pressures, they still feel well prepared for future engineering roles. This points to the strength of the core engineering experience of hands-on learning, exposure to real projects, and meaningful technical work.

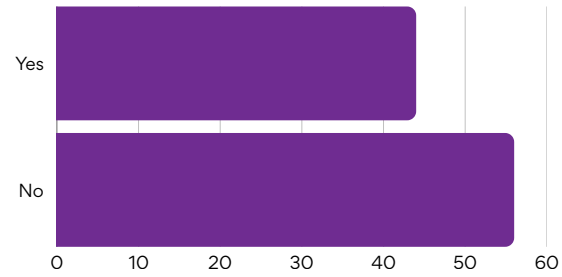
The data paint a highly positive picture. All our apprentices feel prepared in some way. Technical and workplace learning appear strong and relevant, and confidence remains high despite structural and gender-specific challenges elsewhere. This is one of the clearest indicators that the apprenticeship experience is equipping women with the skills and confidence they need to thrive in engineering careers.

Photo credit: © This is Engineering

Workplace culture, safety and inclusion

This section focuses on the lived experience of being a woman apprentice in engineering workplaces with respect to safety, respect, and the practical and cultural factors that shape belonging. It also captures apprentices' suggestions for improving support.

Have you ever been issued PPE or uniforms that didn't fit properly?



Our apprentices described a mixed experience with PPE and uniform fit. The data show a split experience: half of apprentices have received poorly fitting PPE, half have not, suggesting good practice is present but inconsistent.

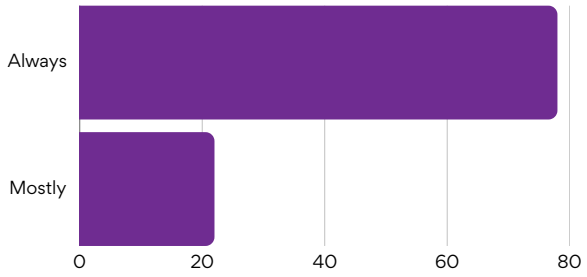
Photo credit: This is Engineering © Rolls-Royce PLC

Half of our women are being expected to work unsafely. Across the responses, half of the apprentices who use PPE reported being issued equipment or uniforms that did not fit them properly. This mirrors long-standing industry evidence that access to well-fitting PPE, is still not a universal experience, leaving many women with safety kit that is too large, uncomfortable, or unsafe. Ill-fitting PPE directly affects safety, confidence, and the ability to work effectively on site so employers should really care about this issue which is affecting their business results and is easily remedied.

There is no excuse for allowing unsafe working. Half of apprentices reported no issues, suggesting that some employers are providing gender-appropriate sizing through flexible ordering systems with access to women-specific PPE ranges. Good practice clearly exists, but it is inconsistent. The problem is not that the sector lacks solutions but that some employers are choosing not to apply them.

Women apprentices are disproportionately affected by poor PPE design and availability. This is a clear area where small, practical changes could have a significant impact on safety and belonging as well as productivity.

Do you feel safe and included in your workplace or training environment?



Our apprentices expressed consistently high levels of safety and inclusion. On the surface, this suggests a universally positive experience. But when viewed alongside the PPE findings above, a more complex picture emerges. Many apprentices appear to be separating their felt sense of safety from the actual safety conditions created by their employers and educators.

There's a strong sense of safety and inclusion, but this is not the full story. Our apprentices indicated that they feel physically and socially safe in their environments. This is a strong indicator of cultural health: workplaces appear respectful, supportive, and welcoming. However, this sentiment sits in tension with the fact that half of these same women are working in PPE that is inherently unsafe. The disconnect suggests that apprentices may be interpreting "safety" primarily as interpersonal or cultural safety, rather than physical safety standards. None of the respondents linked ill-fitting PPE to their sense of safety, despite the clear physical risks it poses, indicating that apprentices may not feel empowered, or informed, to classify equipment issues as safety concerns, even though they objectively are.

For women in engineering, feeling safe is significant given the sector's well-documented cultural challenges. The findings here indicate that women often normalise or absorb physical discomfort and risk because they are accustomed to environments not designed for them. Ill-fitting PPE becomes invisible over time as a daily inconvenience rather than a recognised safety breach. This normalisation disproportionately affects women and masks systemic issues.

The strong cultural safety scores align with other positive indicators: good technical preparation, supportive networks, and positive onboarding. But they misalign with the data which shows that half of the women are working in equipment that compromises their physical safety. This suggests that cultural inclusion is improving faster than practical inclusion, and that apprentices may not yet have the language or confidence to challenge equipment-related risks.

This is a critical insight: women feel safe, but many are not actually being kept safe.

What would help you feel more supported or valued?

The suggestions offered by our apprentices paint a picture of women who feel broadly positive about their experience but can see very practical, solvable improvements that would strengthen their confidence and sense of belonging.

Responsive, timely support from managers

"When issues are raised, they are solved swiftly and not delayed for months."

Timeliness is a core part of feeling valued. Slow responses can signal low priority, while swift action communicates respect and care. Managers play a crucial role in shaping apprentices' trust and sense of belonging, and this comment highlights how much emotional weight apprentices place on being heard and supported.

Women-specific PPE and workwear

"More female sizing for work wear and PPE. A men's small is still too big."

This is an everyday barrier that directly affects safety, comfort, and belonging. Poor PPE fit is a well-documented issue for women in engineering. Providing women-specific PPE is one of the simplest and most visible ways to demonstrate inclusion and ensure physical safety.

Greater job security and clarity about the future

"Better job security post-apprenticeship."

Uncertainty about post-apprenticeship roles undermines confidence and long-term commitment. Clearer communication about progression pathways and what happens after completion would significantly improve perceived support and reduce anxiety.

Better opportunities and stronger managerial support

"Being given better opportunities and better managerial support."

Women apprentices often receive less informal guidance and fewer stretch opportunities, which can reinforce confidence gaps. Managers need to be proactive in offering development, not waiting for apprentices to self-navigate or self-advocate.

Mentoring and regular check-ins

"Access to a mentor or regular check-ins with experienced engineers would make me feel more supported and help me grow faster."

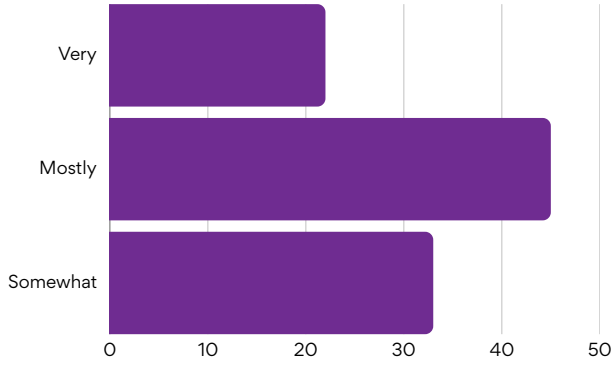
Mentoring is a proven confidence builder, especially for women in male-dominated fields. Regular check-ins reduce uncertainty, create psychological safety, and help apprentices feel anchored in their development.

The data reveal a set of practical, solvable improvements that would help women apprentices feel more supported and valued. These suggestions echo broader themes across the survey: apprentices feel positive overall, but targeted improvements around safety, clarity, and developmental support could significantly enhance their experience and strengthen inclusion.

Academic support and institutional understanding

This section examines the role of universities and colleges in supporting apprentices including the types of support offered, how well institutions understand workplace realities, and how apprentices manage the dual demands of work and study.

Do you feel supported by your university or college in your apprenticeship journey?



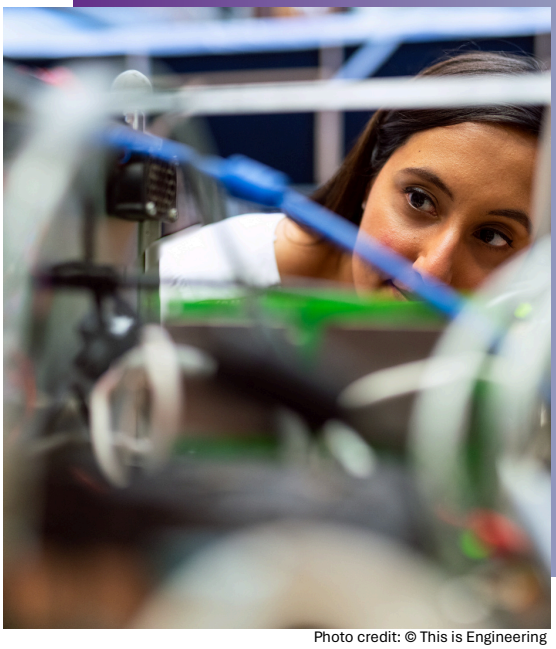


Photo credit: © This is Engineering

Our apprentices reported generally positive levels of support from their university or college. All of our apprentices feel at least some level of academic support. This is to the credit of their supporting academic institutions.

Overall support from universities and colleges is strong. The responses suggest that academic institutions are providing accessible tutors, responsive communication, structured academic guidance, and supportive learning environments. This is a positive indicator of the strength of academic partnerships within apprenticeship programmes. Universities and colleges appear to be playing a meaningful role in apprentices' confidence and progression.

There are gaps in consistency. The data suggest that while support is present, it may be inconsistent and dependent on individual lecturers, limited during busy periods, or unclear around assessment or progression. This is not resulting in apprentices struggling, but it is not supporting them to be fully confident either. These apprentices' experience appears shaped by variability in communication or availability. There is room to strengthen

consistency, so all apprentices receive the same level of support.

No one feels unsupported. The absence of "not supported" responses is significant. Even those who feel only "somewhat supported" still view their university or college as a positive presence in their journey. This is a strong foundation to build onto ensure that everyone experiences consistently excellent support.

T**he data show a strongly positive picture**. Academic institutions are contributing positively to apprentices' sense of capability and progression by providing meaningful guidance and stability, and for women apprentices in engineering, this support is especially important for confidence and belonging. This is one of the more encouraging findings in the dataset, highlighting the value of strong academic partnerships in apprenticeship programmes.

Which types of support have you received from your university or college?

Across our apprentices there was almost universal indication of receiving only academic guidance: tutoring, feedback, or module-related support. There was very little mention of pastoral support, wellbeing support, career guidance, administrative help, or EPA-specific support.

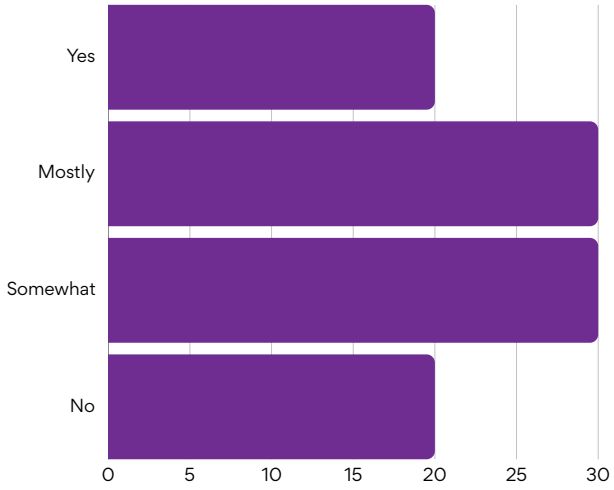
Colleges and universities are consistently meeting their core expectations. Universities and colleges are consistently delivering the core support and fundamental responsibility to help apprentices succeed academically, even in a climate where higher education funding is tightening and institutions are under increasing pressure to prioritise essential services.

The lack of other support types is notable. While academic guidance is universal, the lack of pastoral support, wellbeing support, career or progression guidance, administrative help, or EPA-specific support is striking. This may reflect the reality of the current higher education landscape: with reduced funding and stretched staff capacity, non-academic support services are often the first to be scaled back or become less visible. Apprentices may not be accessing or may not be aware of broader services that could enhance their experience. Universities may need to communicate more clearly about the full range of support available beyond academics, especially as institutional resources become more constrained.

The importance of external support networks. Women often benefit from pastoral support during confidence dips, wellbeing support in male-dominated environments, career guidance tailored to under-represented groups, and access to mentoring or role models. When universities are limited in what they can provide due to funding pressures, external organisations such as the Women's Engineering Society become even more important. WES can offer the networks, mentoring, advocacy, and gender-specific support that institutions may struggle to resource internally.

There is a clear and consistent picture, that academic guidance is universally received, but other forms of support are either not accessed or not recognised. In higher- and further- education environments where funding is increasingly constrained, institutions may be focusing on core academic delivery at the expense of broader support. Women apprentices may therefore be missing out on services that could help address gender-specific challenges. This makes the role of external organisations such as the Women's Engineering Society even more vital in providing holistic, inclusive support structures. The academic foundation is strong, but there is a clear opportunity to strengthen the wider ecosystem of support around women apprentices.

Do you feel your university or college understands the realities of your workplace experience?



Apprentices expressed mixed levels of confidence that their university or college understands what their workplace experience is actually like.

A divided experience. The responses show a clear split: suggesting that the quality of employer–university/college alignment varies significantly across institutions and programmes. Apprenticeship success depends on both sides understanding each other and this is not yet consistent.

Lecturers are supportive but not necessarily industry-immersed, academic content that aligns broadly but not precisely with workplace tasks, and some awareness of workplace pressures without the full picture means that our apprentices feel seen but not fully understood. Better communication between employers and colleges and universities could help close the disconnect which can create frustration, stress, and a sense of being pulled between two systems that don't speak to each other.

The data show a split experience: just over half feel understood, while nearly half feel their university does not fully grasp workplace realities. This inconsistency affects confidence, integration, and support, which for women apprentices is amplified by gendered workplace dynamics. Strengthening employer–institution alignment is a clear opportunity to significantly enhance the apprenticeship experience.

Have you experienced challenges balancing academic and workplace demands?

Our apprentices described a wide range of experiences.

Balancing the dual demands of full-time work and academic study is a common challenge for apprentices, who often juggle workplace responsibilities, assignments, deadlines, exams, and off-the-job learning without consistent protected time. This reflects a core structural tension in degree apprenticeships: apprentices are both employees and students, and when employers and universities fail to coordinate expectations, overload becomes inevitable.

Experiences vary widely. Some apprentices face frequent strain due to heavy workloads, demanding modules, or poor alignment between academic and workplace expectations — conditions that heighten the risk of stress and burnout. Most experience occasional but manageable pressure that spikes during peak assessment periods, while a small minority thrive in well-structured, supportive environments with predictable workloads and clear expectations. These best-practice settings offer valuable lessons for improving support where apprentices are struggling.

The data show a clear pattern that most apprentices struggle at least occasionally because these challenges are structural, not individual, and for women apprentices, the impact may be amplified by gendered workplace dynamics. This is an important area for improvement.

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Identity, belonging and personal growth

The final section brings together our apprentices' reflections on identity, pride and what they want others to understand about their experience as women in engineering. It highlights the emotional, cultural and personal dimensions of their journey.

What's one thing you'd like employers, universities, or training providers to understand about your experience as a woman apprentice?

Apprentices shared a mix of powerful reflections, which can be clustered into five core areas.

Inclusion and belonging matter deeply

Several apprentices emphasised that feeling included, respected and supported is foundational:

"Women apprentices thrive when we feel genuinely included and supported."

Belonging directly shapes confidence, retention, and performance. Employers and training providers must prioritise everyday inclusion, not just formal policies or statements.

Women want equal treatment — not assumptions or stereotypes

"We don't want to be treated any different... we can still perform just as well or better."

Women apprentices want fairness and respect, not lowered expectations or over-correction. They also want acknowledgement of real, embodied experiences that affect work. Inclusive practice means treating women as equals while recognising gender-specific needs without stigma.

Being taken seriously remains a challenge

"How hard it is to be taken seriously and given the right opportunities."

"We have to work twice as hard just to justify ourselves."

This reflects a well-documented pattern: women in engineering often face stereotype-based doubt and must continually demonstrate competence. Managers and educators must actively counteract bias and ensure women apprentices receive meaningful opportunities, not token roles.

Work–life balance and wellbeing pressures are real

"WORK LIFE BALANCE."

"How hard it is balancing university and the apprenticeship and my mental wellbeing."

The dual demands of work and study are intense, and gendered pressures can amplify that load. Employers, colleges and universities must coordinate better to reduce overload and protect wellbeing.

Support, visibility, and role models make a profound difference

"Support and visibility matter."

"Having mentors and clear communication makes a huge difference."

Women apprentices benefit enormously from seeing women ahead of them and having access to guidance. Mentoring, networks, and visible role models should be embedded into apprenticeship programmes or accessed through organisations like WES, not left to chance.

The data reveal a set of powerful, consistent messages:

- Women apprentices want respect, fairness, and equal treatment
- They want genuine inclusion, not performative gestures
- They face challenges being taken seriously in male-dominated environments
- They need better support for wellbeing and workload balance
- They thrive when they have role models, mentors, and visibility

These insights align closely with earlier survey findings and reinforce the need for gender-aware support structures that recognise both the challenges and the strengths women apprentices bring to engineering.

What's one thing you're proud of in your apprenticeship journey so far?

Our apprentices shared a wide range of achievements, clustered around four themes:

Leadership, representation, and advocacy. Several apprentices highlighted leadership roles and representation as major sources of pride including becoming a WES Apprentice Board member, chairing their Employee Resource Group and acting as a visible woman in STEM. Women apprentices are not just participating but are leading. They are stepping into roles that shape culture, influence peers, and challenge stereotypes. These contributions often sit outside formal job descriptions, yet they have significant organisational impact. Employers and training providers should recognise and support this leadership, which is both labour and legacy.

Outreach and inspiring future generations. Women apprentices are actively widening participation and creating the role models they themselves lacked. This outreach is invaluable and should be celebrated and supported as part of organisational inclusion strategies.

Technical and professional qualifications. Some apprentices highlighted technical achievements which reflect growing technical confidence and capability and are essential foundations for long-term engineering careers. Providing meaningful technical opportunities accelerates both confidence and identity formation.

Personal development, confidence, and career transformation. Several apprentices highlighted profound personal growth including building confidence after being shy, developing public speaking skills and capability and making a major career change later in life. These reflections show that apprenticeships are transformative both professionally and personally. Support structures that nurture confidence and identity are essential for women in engineering.

The data reveal a cohort of women apprentices who are ambitious, resilient, community-minded, technically capable, and increasingly confident. Their achievements span leadership, outreach, technical skill, academic excellence, and personal transformation, marking them out as ones to watch in their organisations and across the wider engineering sector.

They are not only excelling individually but shaping the culture around them, inspiring peers and strengthening the pipeline for the women coming up behind them. Their momentum, mindset, and impact signal a generation of emerging engineers whose influence will continue to grow, and whose stories offer a powerful blueprint for what supportive, inclusive apprenticeship environments can unlock.

Thank You

Thank you to our brilliant apprentices who took the time to complete the survey to ensure their voices are heard and can shape the engineering industry for the better. Thank you to Maleeha Patel from our Apprentice Board for contributing her quotation and photo.

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