

# APPRENTICESHIP WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: FINAL COLLABORATIVE PROJECT OVERVIEW

**Project Title – Exploring barriers to apprenticeship study**

**Organisations/Partnership Names: University of Portsmouth (UoP), Hampshire County Council (HCC), Defence Science & Technology Laboratory (DSTL)**



Hampshire  
County Council



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## Exploring barriers to apprenticeship study

### Project Overview: The problem and why this project is important

The catalyst for this project was an email received by an apprentice prior to the start of term. The image in Figure 1 (below) is taken from an apprentice's email three days before term starts and demonstrates the ineffective communication surrounding a return to learning and the impact this has on apprentices and the significant risk of withdrawal. Although this is just one example, it provides some insight into the justification for why this type of project and working with collaborative colleagues was important. This project allowed apprentices' voices and perspectives to be heard, resulting in an evidence-based approach which has been developed in collaboration with employers, alongside a tool kit which has been generated for use by apprenticeship training providers. The apprentice who sent the email in Figure 1 sadly withdrew from their apprenticeship:

returning back to my apprenticeship

Hi [REDACTED]

I've just seen that we are apparently back into uni this Thursday, I've had no emails to confirm this so could you confirm? It seems very disjointed as well, nothing next week, but then something the week after, then a couple back-to-back etc.

[REDACTED] I'm not confident over it, nor the  
[REDACTED]. Not sure I will be continuing.

Figure 1- Email from an apprentice following a break in learning regarding their return to study

Building on this, our collaborative project aimed to explore the lived experiences of apprentices who have, or were at risk from withdrawing from their studies, by collaboratively working with established employers who have Degree Apprenticeships across all levels (HEF 4-6). The project purpose was to identify better processes and interventions to assist in preventing those apprentices at risk of withdrawing from their studies. The main outcome of this project was to develop an evidenced-based best practice framework resource, defined from the interviews, which would positively influence apprentice engagement and completion rates institutionally, and also act as a template for other Education Providers to support their apprentice retention rates.

### **Project Aims:**

1. Identify key factors that contribute to potential\* and actual withdrawals.
2. Interpret key factors which influence withdrawal.
3. Analyse mechanisms and processes that can be put in place to support apprentices to minimise the risk of withdrawal and increase engagement.
4. Create a framework of best practice to be shared to positively impact success.

\*by 'potential withdrawals' we are referring to the lived experiences of apprentices who have faced challenges as an apprentice yet managed to continue with their studies.

## **Project Activities: Making it Happen**

The study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore participant experiences (*project aim 1*). The interviews occurred in three stages:

- **Stage 1:** Interviews with apprentices who had withdrawn from their studies to identify common themes and barriers.
- **Stage 2:** Interviews with partner employers to understand their views on apprentices at risk of withdrawing.
- **Stage 3:** Interviews with successful apprentices who had faced challenges but continued their studies.

Ethical approval for this project was gained via the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Throughout this process the collaborative team, which consisted of University of Portsmouth staff members and employer representatives from Hampshire County Council (HCC), Defence Science & Technology Laboratory (DSTL), met on a monthly basis to monitor progress, launch and shape the research architecture (at all stages).

Prior to involvement, potential participants were informed of the study's goals, assured anonymity, and provided their voluntary consent. The semi-structured interview format focused on exploring individual apprentices' career histories, trajectories, challenges, and expectations, with tailored questions agreed with employers for each group stage.

During interview stages 1 & 3 staff from the University of Portsmouth conducted semi-structured interviews with apprentices. The interviewers were not involved in the delivery of any of the apprentices' courses, to assist in ameliorating any potential ethical concerns.

Data collection was managed carefully, with interviews transcribed by a professional transcription service and anonymised to reduce bias. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data, ensuring consistency and identifying themes (*project aims 2&3*).

Findings from the apprentice interviews centred around the following key themes: communication, curriculum design, belongingness and preparedness for End Point Assessment.

The stage 2 employer interviews highlighted the tension between educational and business goals, with employers emphasising the return on investment and workforce development through apprenticeships.

The interview findings contributed to the development of an Apprentice Journey Log and an accompanying evidence-based supplementary entrepôt of vignettes (*project aim 4*). The vignettes provide real-world case studies which have been incorporated as part of a staff development package, focussed on supporting apprentice retention. Employer feedback contributed to each of the pilot stage phases:

1. **First evidenced-based draft** – created by the research members of the project team with joint and individual feedback provided by the collaborative employer partners.
2. **Pilot draft** – used with two alternative employers and associated apprentices. The pilot Apprentice Journey Log was used in tripartite meetings and subsequent post-meeting feedback was provided from the apprentices and employers, to inform the final version.
3. **Final version** – this has subsequently been deployed for use across the university and is available as an external resource for other education providers to draw upon.

Following the pilot of the evidence-based Apprentice Journey Log the final version has subsequently been rolled out institutionally. This is supported via roll-out events and dissemination of workshops to explore how apprentices can be more effectively supported during their studies.

## Overcoming challenges

**Challenge:** The project experienced a delayed start due to contract formalities, which impacted on us in accessing funds. **Impact:** As a result, interview transcriptions couldn't occur in stages as we had initially planned. **Outcome:** Instead of using early data analysis to shape subsequent interviews, the team had to rely on the employer partners' expertise to refine the interview structure, resulting in a standardised set of semi-structured questions being developed. Whilst this was not what was intended, it did become a positive outcome

as the questioning was aligned across all three phases.

**Challenge:** Two employer partners dropped out. **Impact:** the team mitigated this by involving additional gatekeepers to access a wider apprentice pool. This broadened the sample and provided valuable, previously unavailable data. **Outcome:** As a result, project funds initially allocated to the lost employer partners were redirected to two project team members who increased their contributions. This shift also supported the development of the pilot phase.

**Challenge:** The delay in accessing funds also affected the pilot phase, shifting the focus from pre- and post-assessment of apprentice re-induction enhancements to the development of the Apprentice Journey Log. **Impact:** Although this wasn't what was planned, the development of the Apprentice Journey Log led to a reimagined pilot, which was evaluated by multiple stakeholders (employers and apprentices) opposed to simply apprentices which was the envisaged route. **Outcome:** By testing the pilot Apprentice Journey Log with two employers and their apprentices, the evidenced-based final version has been much more holistically reviewed. As such, the final version is now deployed across the university and available for external use.

## Project Outputs/Resources

The main outcome of this project was the development of a series of evidenced-based best practice framework resources (originating from data analysis following the interview stages). The outputs from this project are designed to positively influence apprentice engagement and completion rates, whilst also acting as a template for other Education Providers to support their apprentice retention rates.

Each of the toolkit elements are listed below:

- 1) **Interview process** - this is a 'how to' guide designed to support the qualitative data gathering process for this study. By providing step-by-step guidance as to how to undertake a project of this type, the study can be replicated allowing the evidence-base to be further developed.
  - a) **Semi-structured interview questions framework**- this provides a framework for questions to be asked as part of the interview process and would support any future studies of this type to align with this project, resulting in expansion of the evidence base.
- 2) **Key questions checklist** – this resource provides an evidenced-based checklist for education providers to consider when apprentices commence a Break in Learning. The checklist combines the key themes from this research project, alongside relevant questions that education providers should consider alongside broader considerations to support and manage a positive return to study following the Break in Learning.
- 3) **Apprentice Journey Log (AJL)** - which has been developed to enhance engagement and support for apprentices across stakeholders. At the University of Portsmouth, the

AJL has been adopted by the central Degree Apprenticeship Office (DAO), and is being utilised by work-based tutors, apprentices, and employers. The AJL is an evidence-based log, derived from a thematic analysis of apprentice and employer interviews, and aims to reduce apprentice withdrawals, particularly for those on Breaks in Learning or apprentices joining/rejoining established cohorts. The Apprentice Journey log is designed for ease of use, and embedded within it are a series of hyperlinked instructions to aid accessibility. The Apprentice Journey Log (AJL) could easily be adapted for use by other education providers and the collaborative project team would welcome the opportunity to work with other education providers to develop the AJL to meet their bespoke system requirements, support staff training and evaluate the impact of these changes. The AJL resources consist of the following elements:

- a) **AJL blank** – this is a template which can be used and adapted by education providers for their own internal purposes to support the Break in Learning processes within their own educational environment
  - b) **AJL example** – this provides an example of how the AJL can be used to support apprentices returning from a Break in Learning
  - c) **CPD video** – this provides an overview to the hyperlinked resource within the AJL that offers CPD training for academics, which directly links to a previously AWD funded project (Academic Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Project 2023). The CPD project resulted in the development of an accessible online resource to help academics and professional staff to better understand apprenticeship requirements and compliance frameworks (by providing a centralised platform for information and guidance). As the CPD project is hosted in a Virtual Learning Environment, including a hyperlink allows for asynchronous learning to become part of the support element embedded within the AJL.
  - d) **AJL instructions**- this provides guidance as to how to complete each of the three sections (stage 1,2 &3) in the AJL. The decision to removed the content into a separate document came from direct feedback from the pilot phase and aimed to keep the AJL itself as streamlined as possible.
  - e) **AJL SiT questions**- this is a series of questions designed to assist education providers by supporting the Staying-in -Touch conversation element of the AJL.
- 4) **Apprentice Vignettes** - these supplementary resources contain anonymised vignettes showcasing apprentices' lived experiences, highlighting key challenges without revealing any personal details. These vignettes exemplify the evidence-based themes identified in the project and support the approaches taken to support apprentices deemed to be 'at risk' and are designed to be discussion points which can be used in staff development activities.
- a) **Vignette guide** – this resource provides an 'how to' guide for researchers and education providers to plan and produced an anonymised vignette to highlight the lived experiences of an apprentice
- 5) **Staff development slide deck** – this slide deck is designed to facilitate the roll-out of the toolkit. The presentation emphasises both the thematic findings and practical



elements of the project, alongside encouraging attendees to explore apprentice support needs and align them with their professional practices and to consider how internal practices influence this.

- a) **Session plan** – the session plan resource aligns with the associated staff development slide deck and outlines in detail how the staff training slide deck can be facilitated.

The full overview of the resources, alongside identifying the relationship between each resource and the relevant stakeholders can be seen in the **Toolkit Guide**. Moving forwards, the project team plans to collaborate with other education providers to further develop and evaluate these resources.

## The Results: Impact on Real Lives

*“somebody’s got to show them, somebody’s got to take the time to support that person a particular, whether it’s a process, whether it’s how to do something, whatever it might be, somebody’s got to take that time to do that.”*

Anonymised quote from an employer

The implementation of the Apprentice Journey Log (AJL) has been a key driver for improving the Degree Apprenticeship experience, particularly for apprentices who have withdrawn from their studies. The AJL has been adopted as part of the institution’s quality assurance process and will be reviewed annually. To support its integration, internal staff training will be conducted, involving work-based tutors, course leaders, and the Degree Apprenticeship Office, ensuring that all relevant parties are familiar with the new processes. Institutionally the University has over 160 staff members who are directly involved in supporting approximately 800 apprentices, who are also supported by a further 700 employers.

*“They’re really well immersed and they’re able to understand us, we’re able to understand them, the apprentices have got somebody readily available on tap and they develop that relationship.... it’s much more of a shared journey..... something that benefits the apprentice.”*

Anonymised quote from an employer

Future training will focus on the AJLs role in supporting apprentices and reducing the number of withdrawals, using real-world examples (via participant quotes, which are incorporated into the vignettes, to illuminate the apprentices lived experiences). An online resource will also be developed for staff members to access asynchronously, so that new and part-time staff members can access the launch training via a flexible format.

Results from the face-to-face launch training event will be evaluated and incorporated into the findings from this project, which will then be presented at an internal conference. Opportunities to also share and disseminate the research elements will also be sought with a view to publication in a peer-reviewed journal(s) and presentation at a national conference.

By conducting this project, the collaborative team have gained valuable skills in qualitative research, alongside experiencing the benefits which the collaborative aspects have generated. Engagement with employers has resulted in positive outcomes from a pilot phase (where the AJL helped returning apprentices reintegrate smoothly into their studies).

Pilot feedback from both apprentices and employers has led to the refinement of the AJL, with employers gaining greater awareness of apprentices at risk of disengagement. The project emphasises the importance of listening to apprentices and employers to create a more holistic and supportive apprenticeship experience.

## Looking Forward: What's Next?

The next steps for the evidenced-based outputs from this project are:

- **Internal Staff Training:** Conduct face-to-face training for work-based tutors, Degree Apprenticeship Office staff, and Degree Apprenticeship Course Leaders to support the implementation of the Apprentice Journey Log (AJL). This training aims to familiarise staff with the new processes and how to engage apprentices within their day-to-day practices effectively.
- **Pre- and Post-Training Evaluation:** The team will assess the impact of the training sessions via evaluations conducted before and after the sessions.
- **Annual Review:** The AJL process will be reviewed annually to ensure its continued effectiveness and alignment with best practices.
- **Online Learning Resource:** Develop a reusable online learning object for new and future staff members, available on the university's intranet, to provide ongoing support for staff using the AJL.
- **Internal Staff Conference:** Share the findings and outcomes from the AJL project at an internal staff conference focused on apprenticeship provision.

These internally focussed steps aim to embed the AJL into our quality assurance framework, alongside providing staff support and improving staff engagement with learners, with a view to ensuring better engagement and outcomes for all apprentices during their studies.

Externally, the next steps for the evidenced-based outputs from this project include:

- **Employer Engagement:** Continue working with employer partners to refine and



enhance the AJL based on their feedback. Employers will be key in identifying apprentices at risk of disengagement and supporting their journey through the AJL process.

- **Employer Awareness:** Increase awareness among employers about apprentices who may be at risk of non-completion or disengagement. This includes ensuring they actively participate in identifying and supporting these apprentices.
- **Feedback Integration:** Collect and integrate ongoing feedback from employers and apprentices to further develop the AJL, ensuring that it addresses the needs of all stakeholders.
- **Promoting Holistic Practices:** Externally, the project emphasises the need for a holistic approach to Degree Apprenticeship monitoring and provision. From our findings it is clear that a key to enhancing the education providers management of the apprenticeship experience is incorporating the voices of apprentices and employers into the process. This will be a crucial aspect in aligning external practices with internal support mechanisms in the future.

The above steps aim to foster a more collaborative relationship with external partners, ensuring that the outputs from this project are effective across all dimensions of the apprenticeship experience.

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