

APPRENTICESHIP WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: APPRENTICE VIGNETTES

Project Title – Exploring barriers to apprenticeship study

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



Hampshire
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Apprentice vignettes

Vignettes are an excellent way to showcase descriptive episodes, real events and case studies and in this project apprentices' lived experiences. A well-created vignette provides trainers with an effective resource to facilitate discussion, empathy and understanding of other's experiences. It allows an opportunity to explore experiences but importantly create strategies and steps that could be utilised to improve practice and experiences. Depending on the themes that arise from the vignettes a range of relevant questions can be created to facilitate meaningful discussion and positive change.

Included within in this resource pack are vignettes which reflect the lived experiences of four apprentices who have experienced barriers during their apprenticeship study:



Amina - returning to study following a Break in Learning and has caring responsibilities to juggle



Emily – returning to study following a parental leave Break in Learning



Mark – joining an established apprenticeship due to recognised prior learning



Samuel – returning to study following a Break in Learning and has experienced a change in course delivery

Amina



Amina is a degree apprentice enrolled within a higher education institution. They are currently on a break in learning and are due to resume their studies this September, in 2 months.

Amina describes her entry into education as 'very late in life' due to joining the forces at 16, as such this apprenticeship is their first opportunity to engage with higher education.

"So I got to this point in my life really when university knocked on the door and asked me if it was something that I wanted to do. So I couldn't wait to get started and I'm still very eager to go back into it again in September."

Amina was invited to share her experiences and challenges during the apprenticeship:

"Without a doubt probably the same thing everybody's saying, it's balance, that's the hardest part really. I have four kids, it's very demanding, and balancing that..... is the reason I dropped out during the beginning of the second year, because I had to move house etc." Apprentices are not traditional students; they are often mature learners with demands not just from their workplace but also their busy lives, resulting in fewer study hours and competing demands (Umeokafor, 2022) which are important considerations for employers and training providers when supporting engagement, achievement, and well-being. ***"The pressure alongside everything else I was doing, was just too much, I just couldn't take it. That's been difficult, balancing all that sort of stuff, without a shadow of a doubt."***

Amina also talked about their feelings requesting a break in learning:

"The university said it's not a problem, if you need the break, then you take the break and you can pick it back up again. That's been the most useful thing." Although Amina utilised a break in learning, it was evident that this request was also a challenge. ***"I think, like, initially having that conversation's quite difficult because you're admitting that you can't quite do all this, that's quite a hard conversation to have as you get older. Because you can't quite do everything that you want to do so the support in that way's a little bit difficult."***

When asked about any other challenges and aspects of the apprenticeship that were least beneficial, Amina outlined the performative aspect of the apprenticeship and the associated systems. ***"I suppose it's in systems..... it was painful."***

This is clearly a concern for Amina as she prepares to return to her studies. ***“And probably... when I go back, it still will be painful. It’s not an easy system to navigate, there’s an awful lot of, a huge amount of reminders and all sorts of stuff that goes in there... and coming back, you know, it’s been a long break since I was doing it and how I apply it again, is going to take a lot of memory.”*** When probed about support concerning the system regarding their return to learning, Amina announced, ***“without doubt a refresher, a refresher hour.”***

Amina reflected on the communications with the training provider pertaining to their return to learning:

“That sort of stuff helps, you know. It’s still very, very slow, it’s been two months, I think, maybe longer, that I approached the university to say, look, you know, I want to come back, can I start? And it was just tumbleweed, you know, I kept emailing... who do I need to talk to, is there something I need to do?” It is evident that Amina is very proactive and committed to her studies, what might the implications be for an apprentice that does not have this drive and determination? It may well be that Amina’s needs regarding returning to her studies do not align with the University processes or timelines. Amina suggested that ***“I’d rather know too much in advance.”*** They also talked about what elements were an important part of this preparation: ***“pre-reading stuff which I find important, I want to get my brain going again so I can start to ready myself for year two.”*** This comment indicates that being fully prepared a high priority. Another important factor was a concern related to comparing themselves unfavourably with their ‘new’ peers. ***“I don’t want to go in there cold, that [sic] I would feel probably at a disadvantage with the guys that have just finished year one and going into year two, their brain’s still ticking over.”***

Amina was asked during the interview how she felt about her return to university:

“I can’t wait, at the same time I’m intrepidus without doubt, you know things have changed you know, I’ve got to try and balance that, rebalance that again regards coming into university.” Although Amina feels ready to return, the original challenges have not fully disappeared and are still a concern for Amina. ***“I mean, that’s just something I’ve got to get past. I know how much work it’s going to be and how much effort I’ll have to put in again, but going back is exciting but at the same time I’m just, kind of, worried about the impact it has at home.”***

When asked about support and strategies that could be provided to support the transition Amina discussed:

“feeling a part of it before you get there, I don’t want to arrive on September 1st and I’m meeting a new group of people, because it’s not the same cohort I was with in the first year. So I would like to be able to meet them, just to say hello. You know, get involved in any WhatsApp groups, just introduce myself and so forth, that would be nice.” Amina again referred back to the lack of communications from the training provider, indicating that this was a significant area of concern for her, ***“and just general communication from the university, whether it’s from the learning side, as in from the tutors themselves, you know, or the course lead.”***

When Amina was offered to share the beneficial aspects of her apprenticeship, she referred to communications with her work-based tutor:

“For me the workplace tutor was very good, I enjoyed many conversations with them and she’s been very, very supportive. As well, at the same time, holding me to task on things that needed to be done, which is fine.” Amina went on to talk about the challenge for the work-based tutor of engaging the employer, ***“which is probably, well actually the hardest thing without a doubt, you know, just getting them to the table.”*** Amina alluded to her new line manager’s support for the apprenticeship. ***“I think with my new boss, she’s really supportive and probably will be a little bit easier to talk to and to be involved as part of that group.”*** This is another example of a change of line manager for a returning apprentice - an important detail for training providers when supporting employers and apprentices back from a break in learning.

Apprentices often have very complex lives; they are not just full-time students in the traditional sense. Training providers must take this into account and provide relevant information and assistance so apprentices can confidently utilise a break in learning. Furthermore, good processes must be in place to ensure the ‘quieter’ apprentices are remembered, processes that must not reflect ‘tumbleweed’!

References

Umeokafor, N. (2021). Briefing: The role of higher-education apprenticeship in apprentices’ mental health and well-being. *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers – Management, Procurement and Law*, 175(2), 50-53.
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Emily



Emily, a degree apprentice is currently on a break in learning and is due to return to her studies in two months. Emily's rationale for enrolling on an apprenticeship was to have an 'academic grounding' to support career progression into more senior roles.

During her interview, Emily outlined some of the challenges that impacted her apprenticeship:

"During the very beginning of the COVID response I got headhunted into a role in public health, so that is I suppose, one of the sort of starting points, so meaning that I did have to pause my studies."

Emily talked about her situation and why she is currently on a break from her studies. ***"I felt pregnant in the end as well, so that was the big reason why I had to pause, because I was having a baby."***

Emily also discussed other challenges and resistance she experienced whilst on programme studying for her apprenticeship:

"it was a bit of a fight to get my senior management team to see the value in what it was that I wanted to do, really sort of get behind me. My SMT lead asked me that I did it outside of work time." It was clear Emily felt her senior management team did not appreciate the value of the apprenticeship. ***"There was a bit of resistance at the time in terms of understanding quite how the apprenticeship was going to develop me and then those skills that I could disseminate back to the workplace."*** When queried if this was due to their line manager's awareness of the rules and regulations, Emily responded, ***"He knew all along what the commitments were and we always had in the back of our mind that this particular SMT lead would be moving on at some point, which she then did and then everything just felt so much easier and there was no sort of hiding away and having to be working in the office, but actually getting on with an assignment and stuff like that."*** This clearly had an impact on Emily as she expressed her hope that this was not common practice. ***"My line manager was fabulous. I don't think there's many people that would have that sort of experience. So, I do think that was...I really hope that that was a one-off case and there aren't others that might be in that sort of position"***, although research would indicate this is still a current issue (Cook et al., 2024; Poole et al., 2023).

As part of the interview questions, Emily was asked to share her perspective, communications and expectations around her return to learning:

“I mean I’ll be honest I’ve not had that much contact; in fact, I’ve not had any contact from the course team yet. So, I’m assuming they’re trying to work things out in the background to try and get that information to me... so if I’ve not heard anything by tomorrow, I’ll get the apprentice lead on the case and see if they can nudge someone.” This is another example of a proactive apprentice initiating the first move and instigating communication with the training provider. When probed about what they felt the process should be they responded ***“I mean it would be good if, I don’t know, a proposed timetable could have been sent to me in advance. Yeah, I think if I was in contact with the course leader, this would help.”*** At this point Emily alluded to further challenges surrounding the communication of her break in learning. ***“I think this is another thing I should probably raise as well, I think there was some sort of breakdown in communication that led to the team thinking that I would be returning last September”***, causing confusion for the apprentice. ***“So it just so happens that I knew somebody that was on that cohort anyway and they messaged me saying your name’s on the register. I’m like okay, I’m definitely not meant to be there though!”*** indicating ineffective communication within the training provider, and an issue the apprentice needs to resolve. ***“So something must have gone wrong at that point for them to be expecting me to have returned last year... I’d made it specifically clear that I’d take a year off for MAT leave, a year off to settle back to work and then I’d come back in 2024.”***

When asked about her views concerning support during and returning from a break in learning Emily suggested:

“Perhaps there could be scope to introduce somebody that’s returning to their new cohort before the September when they’re going to meet them for the first time... or have a list of names so they can see if there’s anybody that they know on it.” Emily also discussed the use of systems and the training providers online platform. ***“I think the continued access to Moodle is great because I can go on and I can have a look and see what’s going on, on there. There’s so many resources. It was beneficial, even if it was a mistake {still having access to Moodle}”***, indicating the benefits of still being in the loop and being able to access resources. On her feelings about returning to learning and joining an existing group, Emily explained, ***“I like to think that I can blend in quite well to a group. So I appreciate obviously they’ve been together for three years.”*** As part of the interview Emily alluded to other apprentices joining her group when she was on programme. ***“We had people that were joining in Years 2 and 3 and it***

felt like they just blended in. There were WhatsApp groups which people were automatically invited to as soon as a new name popped up on the Zoom classroom. So I don't feel anxious at all. I don't know if I know anybody from Year 3, but we'll see yeah."

One question related to curriculum design and Emily's response was associated with the lack of a timetable for when she returns to study indicating that this missing information and communication was a concern for her at this time prior to returning to learning:

"I don't know what the current expectations are around campus days and what's included and what's not, because I'm still waiting to hear back in terms of what that's going to look like for me when I rejoin in September."

Joining a social media group has been a popular theme throughout the interviews. In Emily's situation, an assumption has been made that apprentices will automatically be invited to join social media groups. However, that experience originates from a hybrid delivery method during COVID-19 and is not necessarily representative of current practices, further highlighting the importance of ensuring effective communication through all stages of a break in learning as well as during the months before a return to study; administrative challenges also identified by Mulkeen et al. (2019). Fundamentally, an apprentice must be fully prepared and aware of their timetable, delivery methods and expectations to support their engagement and achievement and mitigate the risk of withdrawal.

References

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Mulkeen, J., Abdou, H.A., Leigh, J., & Ward, P. (2019). Degree and Higher Level Apprenticeships: an empirical investigation of stakeholder perceptions of challenges and opportunities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(2), 333-346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1365357>



Mark is a degree apprentice studying at a higher education institution. Due to recognised prior learning, he joined an existing cohort a term later than his peers. Mark discussed his experiences of joining this cohort, revealing that:

“the worst thing is getting over that first part of having to join an already established group.”

Although Mark attended the term one induction event with his peers, they were not advised that he would actually be joining them when the second term commenced and not starting in term one, and then only in the afternoons. Mark made some observations during the interview about his initial interactions with his peers upon joining the cohort at the start of term two:

“oh you’re that guy! They were expecting it but I think initially it was a little bit intimidating joining a brand new class” and “I definitely think that communication would help. I think that would be definitely something to take away for other people that would be in our position.”

Mark was aware at this point that the group were expecting him, but they did not know who he was or how contact could be made. When asked what might have helped this transition Mark responded:

“Well, I was going to say a WhatsApp group but it’s quite hard... they’re already building a relationship seeing each other every week anyway.” Additionally, Mark made some suggestions that he felt would have supported him on his first day on campus, for example, he would have found it reassuring if the course tutor was aware of his attendance and that he was new. ***“I don’t know if the tutor that I had, if they knew that I was joining for the first time.”*** There was a clear need that staff and peers should have been aware that this was Mark’s starting point and support provided ***“someone I knew to be there on the first day, that might help”***, and perhaps even more simply, ***“just letting everyone know in the introduction {induction session} because that probably would have helped because I think there was something like, who the hell are you.”*** By providing information at the outset Mark felt that he would have been given ***“a chance to get to know everyone... that probably would have been useful.”***

Mark continued to discuss his experiences after joining the existing group in term two:

“I got added to the WhatsApp group, everyone was really nice and then I didn’t really feel like I was the odd one out at all really.” Mark then outlined the challenges of his timetable and the significant impact of only attending in the afternoons. ***“The only thing was when we were sat down, I was sat on the corner... everyone would have the full days and then I would come in for the last half of the day. So, I was always making sure I wasn’t nicking someone’s seat when they were out at lunch”***. Mark recognised that if he had attended in the morning it would have provided a better opportunity to build a rapport with his peers and develop a sense of belonging. ***“My lessons being in the morning, rather than the afternoon, I don’t know that might be impossible to change but if it could, it would just mean that I start and then leave at the end and then I would get to know everyone.”***

Mark discussed the tripartite reviews held with his training provider and manager and responded to the question involving the usefulness of these communications:

“Yes, I think so and it’s nice, it feels good for him {line manager} to be there, I do quite like that and it’s, what’s the word, it’s just good to know that he knows what’s going on, even if it’s just high level...it’s just a nice check-in point because it’s very much with uni and with work, it’s very much you are left to get on with it. So, it’s just nice to have that touching base

This scenario indicates the benefits of the tripartate process, and for the apprentice, the only communication held with their line manager concerning the progress of their apprenticeship.

Mark concluded his interview by talking about the curriculum and what joining an existing group with recognised prior learning and a different timetable meant for him:

“For the future assessments, I am unsure of how this may impact. My belief is that everything RPL will not be assessed and not included within my EPA but not 100% certain.” This demonstrates a level of uncertainty around what Mark needs to do to achieve his apprenticeship and a need for clearer communication outlining an apprentice’s individual learning. ***“All my communication around RPL has been verbal, maybe a process or information sheet to refer to would be useful, a point of contact to ask questions if needed and a written process around RPL, detailing specifically what it means for our EPA, impact to the following years’ topics, what we should be doing during the time, who we can talk to for help.”*** Listening to Mark during the interview, it was evident that he had a very different experience to his peers and had missed key aspects of delivery. Mark also recognised that this was another opportunity to be introduced to the cohort. ***“My class also received additional help from XXXX and XXXX when writing their first assignment which could have been beneficial to me as I***

have never written in the 'uni way' before, and also an excuse to meet the rest of the class!"

What is clear from Mark's experiences is that some simple steps to support the transition into an existing group would be very beneficial, steps which would also support other apprentices returning from breaks in learning or joining different groups due to the timetabling of modules. The feeling of belonging for students, especially work-based learners and apprentices is crucial to support engagement and achievement (Taylor-Smith et al., 2019). No apprentice should ever feel the need to worry about 'sitting in someone else's seat'.

References

Taylor-Smith, E., Smith, S., & Smith, C. (2019). Identity and Belonging for Graduate Apprenticeships in Computing: The experience of first cohort degree apprentices in Scotland. *24th Annual Conference on Innovation & Technology in Computer Science Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3304221.3319753>

Samuel



Samuel is completing a degree apprenticeship within a higher education institution and describes himself as a more mature student having been employed in the same workplace for 20 years. Samuel took a break from learning for a year due to COVID-19.

During the interview, Samuel was asked if he experienced any challenges during his apprenticeship:

“Quite a few, if I’m honest...I signed up for the apprenticeship way back in the early days before we even started, because it was an onsite course. We had about two or three months, which was brilliant. The biggest challenge was then suddenly, they were like, that’s it, guys, you can’t come in anymore. We’re in lockdown”. Samuel explained the impact this had: “It felt like an open university type degree and that wasn’t for me. So, I had to learn quite quickly, to adapt to those styles. So, that was quite a big challenge.”

Samuel continued the interview by discussing a personal situation that had also affected his apprenticeship:

“during my second year, sadly, my wife’s dad passed away and that was a real challenge, because obviously, that’s from a family perspective. I had to, sort of, be there to support her, while still delivering those deadlines and assignments. And that was quite a challenge.” Samuel explained that he was supported by the workplace, but it was still difficult to keep up with his apprenticeship. ***“I had a couple of weeks off at that point from my workplace so that I could, you know, have that time. But I still managed to, sort of, keep up with the uni and deliver what was required. But it was quite a difficult time at that point.”***

COVID-19 continued to have an impact on Samuel’s apprenticeship:

“my other big one was when I got long COVID. I came into that first day {of the final year}, met all the cohort again and then had my doctors call to say, I think you need to be signed off.” Samuel had no real opportunity to discuss the break. ***“That was it! It would be about nine months, maybe the full 12 months.”*** During this time, Samuel was clearly worried about his apprenticeship and being able to continue. It would have helped if he had someone to touch base with during this time. ***“So, while I was in that state, I had that, am I going to be able to get back and finish my final year? So, that was quite a challenge.”***

Samuel was then asked how he felt about returning to his studies and completing his apprenticeship:

“Obviously, I have got better and, you know, I managed to get back on the course. And then that led to, sort of, my other anxieties, sort of, crept in of being out for a year. They were quite challenging times... I was sort of, between jobs as well, which was also a bit tricky.” Samuel's situation of a change in job role/ line manager is not unique. Apprentices often return to different positions, within new teams and with a new reporting manager.

Samuel continued and explained some of the anxieties he experienced:

“I thought, oh my God, I think I know where the room is. You know what it's like. I was Google mapping, you know, trying to work out where the XXXX Building was, because I just couldn't remember.” This indicates that time needs to be planned and taken to reintegrate apprentices back onto campus to reduce anxieties. ***“I sort of, turned up and I felt disappointed and sad that I wasn't with my original cohort as well. So, I had to make, sort of, new friends”.*** Although Samuel describes himself as quite social, the situation was still a challenge for him. ***“I'm quite a sociable person, so I knew I could. It was just like the unknowns!”***

When asked about communication and support relating to returning from a break in learning Samuel responded:

“I reached out and spoke to, you know, people in the uni side, just to, sort of, say, you know, if I come back, you know, have I still got the right skill set?” It is clear that Samuel was proactive concerning his return to studies but that he was also very concerned about being missed. ***“I think I'd made such a big deal about returning, that everyone, and others, knew I was returning, if that makes sense. So, I didn't just slip in under the radar.”*** Had Samuel received effective and timely communications there was a good chance this anxiety could have been mitigated. ***“If I hadn't just taken those steps from a personal perspective, I think I would have had a different experience, if I'm honest.”***

On suggestions and strategies to improve the process of returning to studies, Samuel reflected:

“When I returned, it was a totally different experience. So, you know, as I say, a different cohort. I've obviously slipped a year.” This shows the negative connotations associated with a break in learning / interrupted studies (Luckett, 2024) and further demonstrates the requirement for support and communication during the break and in the lead-up to returning. ***“I think what I would have appreciated was maybe a trip, sort of, late August before it started to reintroduce myself to the lead, I think that would have been really, really helpful. I think offering up, like I say, the opportunity of coming in to talk to someone in advance***

of starting the apprenticeship would be quite a good move.”

Communication at this point is not just crucial between the apprentice and the training provider, but also with the employer/ line manager ***“having a meeting with me and my manager in advance ...it’s about setting the scene before it starts.”***

Samuel’s final feedback reflects his experience which highlights the link between his anxieties and the lack of communication from the training provider:

“part of, you know, my feedback is, it’s really hard, but it’s to try and encourage that person returning, that they are going to be okay...it’s okay sending a couple of emails, but it’s about that interaction, isn’t it?”

Samuel concluded the interview by talking about how he currently felt having successfully returned and now waiting for his end point assessment result:

“I think it’s amazing, to be fair. It’s a big achievement. It’s one that this time last year I just felt I’d never get to, and to actually, to get through it, has been absolutely brilliant!”

References

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