

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

How can we improve apprenticeship delivery? The results of a national workforce development program

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ABSTRACT

Despite apprenticeships being a UK ministerial priority for further education and skills, in 2022-2023, only one in four apprenticeships were taken by learners aged 16-19, while a majority came from adult learners aged over 25. Partnership work between the Department for Education and the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), which began two years ago, has focused on addressing some of the barriers facing 16-19 year olds, including those related to learner engagement and retention. This paper reflects on the lessons learned from ETF's national Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) program. It discusses both the factors underpinning success in Apprenticeship delivery and impact, and an emerging model of vocational pedagogy for apprenticeship programs.

Key words: apprenticeship, workforce, training, education

INTRODUCTION

The past fifteen years have witnessed a renewed focus on the vocational curriculum for 16-19 and adult learners in response to growing concerns that UK productivity and social mobility has been declining. Many commentators agree that the historic lack of vocational progression pathways across the UK education system has imposed limitations on aspirations and opportunity for young people (Wolf, 2011). The government's response to this has been a drive towards apprenticeships, improving both the relevance and the availability of high-quality apprenticeship programs across key employment areas.

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF)'s Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) program was a direct response to the national government's determination to raise apprenticeship outcomes. In 2023-2024, 339,580 people started an

apprenticeship, and of these, only 178,220 successfully completed (52%). Although achievement rates have risen steadily over recent years, they are still far short of the government's target of 67%. Using data from 2000 apprentices, the "BIG Apprentice Survey 2024" found that 62% of apprentices reported feeling stressed or anxious with their work/life balance in the previous 12 months and that a primary factor for this was their end-point assessment (EPA; Association of Apprentices, 2025). An "end-point assessment" determines whether a learner achieves the apprenticeship and is a fundamental part of the English system.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

"AWD" was conceived as a professional development program for the entire English apprenticeship sector workforce. It was launched in 2022 and focused on a core question: How can we improve apprenticeship delivery and achievement across the further education

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and skills sector. Two supplementary questions helped to shape the project: How do we improve the learning experience for apprentices? How do we increase achievement rates and reduce withdrawals from apprenticeship programs?

The purpose of AWD was to improve the quality of apprenticeship delivery by upskilling existing/new practitioners who attended the program, and by targeting so-called "failing providers" on the Department for Education's (DfE's) intervention list (as outlined in their Apprenticeship Accountability Framework. As part of AWD, an independent evaluation of impact was undertaken ([Department for Education, 2024](#)).

The ETF, as the lead partner in a consortium of sector-based organizations (Association of Colleges, Association of Employment and Learning Providers, Strategic Development Network, University Vocational Awards Council), took an evidence-based approach to the design of the AWD program which drew on several data sources: (1) A sample of 27 Ofsted Monitoring Reports to identify recurrent themes from providers deemed to making "insufficient progress". Among them, 25 were Independent Training Providers (ITPs), one was an employer provider and one a higher education provider. They were representative of different regions of the country and different occupational areas. (2) A bespoke Training Needs Analysis survey which asked the apprenticeship workforce to rate the value of specific areas of training and development. (3) The DfE's *Apprenticeship checklist for training providers* which identifies key priorities for new providers of apprenticeship provision.

Pooling the findings, and working to the DfE's agreed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), AWD was constructed around three objectives. (1) To develop solutions to common barriers to achievement. (2) To improve the knowledge, skills and confidence of the apprenticeship workforce. (3) To provide opportunities to share effective practice in apprenticeship delivery.

A theory of change was developed for the program, and metrics were identified for evaluating impact. Participants had access to a range of online and in-person training events, bespoke support and action research projects that were developed to meet identified areas of need.

The nature and format of these AWD components were developed in accordance with ETF's *Twelve Principles of Continuing Professional Development*. These revolve around ETF's professional standards for teachers and leaders in further education and skills and include setting clear expectations, using research-informed practices, doing

collaborative tasks and embedding opportunities for deliberate practice. AWD provided an opportunity to test the impact of these principles-in-action.

In respect of the 2nd year of the AWD program (1 September 2023 to 31 March 2024), which this paper draws on, it delivered: (1) 8 x online asynchronous courses; (2) 129 x 3-hour live online sessions; (3) early years sector-specific activity (five live online sessions, 2 x recorded webinars and the development of resources); (4) 9 x in-house continuing professional development (CPD) sessions; (5) bespoke 1-1 support for 13 providers; (6) 10 Apprenticeship Action Groups (AAGs) to sustain networks.

Feedback on participants' experiences, including how AWD changed their practice, was the subject of a formal evaluation study. It used a mixed methods approach to gather evidence of impact, comprising analysis of survey feedback from participants, 43 deep-dive interviews of participants' experience and application of their learning, and 8 case studies of different organizations who engaged with AWD. Working with an independent evaluator, six contribution statements were formalized that measured the effects of AWD on individual practice, team development, quality of provider delivery in apprenticeships, quality of stakeholder relationships, and provider capacity to self-diagnose and resolve apprenticeship curriculum issues.

Case studies incorporated the experiences of ITP, Colleges and Higher Education Institutes, and focused on different program themes *e.g.*, impact of online learning courses, AWD as a catalyst for cultural change, improved collaboration between employers and providers, *etc.*

RESULTS

AWD reached 1719 individuals across the English further education and skills sector in Year 2 of the program, amounting to 2824 separate participations (with some attending more than one element). Out of 870 responses to satisfaction surveys applied to five strands of the second year of AWD activity, 91% said they were satisfied with their overall learning experience. The independent evaluation found that AWD: (1) Contributed positively to impactful professional practice. (2) Improved the practices and knowledge base of teams. (3) Improved the quality of apprenticeship delivery across institutions.

Case study A: positively impacting professional practice

A national ITP, delivering apprenticeships across a wide range of industry sectors (*e.g.*, Management, Security,

Passenger Transport), engaged with AWD to upskill staff on recent apprenticeship policy reforms and improve the quality of delivery. A staff team completed four online asynchronous courses, alongside their senior management colleagues, to increase their knowledge of policy changes and new pedagogic developments in apprenticeship delivery. Inspired by the action-orientation of AWD design, tutors held workshops with other colleagues to cascade their learning, and a peer observation scheme was introduced to promote tutor self-reflection on new principles of delivery, utilizing feedback from apprentices to set improvement goals. As a result, learner engagement and staff learning has been significantly improved, helping to embed a more collaborative and outcomes-focused culture across staff practices.

Case study B: improved knowledge of teams

Organization B is a large specialist ITP delivering 600+ apprenticeships in early years across levels 2-5. Between March and September 2023, the ITP undertook a collaborative project with three other ITPs focusing on methods for preparing apprentices for EPA. The project examined effective practices in improving EPA outcomes, set up cross-organizational networking, and produced written guides and videos to share across multiple organizations. Findings reported that assessors "have improved EPA capabilities, knowledge and skills as a result of the project", leading to "improved learner confidence and sense of preparedness for the EPA" and "higher rates of employment retention within companies", with one provider recording a 35% increase in first-time EPA outcomes ([Education and Training Foundation, 2024](#)).

Case study C: improved quality of apprenticeship delivery across institutions

Organization C is a national ITP which accessed bespoke 1-1 support *via* AWD to improve the quality of delivery and redress retention challenges. This entailed intense consultancy-style support with a lead expert advisor, who mentored senior management and governance teams and helped them to review organizational processes. The organization reported significant enhancements to its quality operation, in which apprenticeship leads used quality improvement plans as "living documents" that informed monthly performance meetings. These facilitated reviews of enrolment, onboarding and guidance processes, and changes to apprentice tracking and early intervention, enabling the provider to meet its matrix Standard for Advice, Information and Guidance. This award is given to providers of further education and skills institutions that have demonstrated robust, high-quality processes for advising learners about the curriculum options and

opportunities available at the provider. Shortly after, the organization credited AWD for its successful inspection result, having been commended for the quality of its apprenticeship delivery and ability to diagnose and self-improve.

CONCLUSION

Impact data from these AWD case studies, *via* an assessment against the evaluation's six contribution statements, has helped ETF to verify its pedagogic model for workforce development. This model is based on ETF's Twelve Principles of CPD and is the foundation stone on which ETF designs national programs such as AWD ([Education and Training Foundation, 2023](#)). For simplicity, these can be summarized in terms of five crucial ingredients: (Specialist) Knowledge, Reflection, Deliberate Practice, Collaboration and Action-Oriented. Collectively, they are streamed across the CPD principles and provide the basis of a rich, deep, expert-led and practical program of professional development for a complex and multi-level workforce. The outcomes for Year 2 of AWD, following similar effects for Year 1, and illustrated in our case studies, suggest that this model can generate a variety of impacts on professional practice. Fundamentally, it has the confidence and support of attending practitioners and leaders, whose outcomes have systematically improved since their engagement with the program.

In time, ETF expects to generate substantial and conclusive evidence of the power of this model to change workforce behaviors and mindsets. This is part of its wider remit in England to support curriculum reform through high quality professional development, exemplified for example, by its national work on T-levels and leadership development. Here, this model is submitted, alongside the impact work, as an opportunity to discuss established and emerging good practice on apprenticeship delivery. While ETF's work is based on the English Apprenticeship workforce, ETF contends that this model is equally applicable to other systems of vocational and technical training where similar challenges around the quality of delivery are experienced.

DECLARATIONS

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Author contributions

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