

Advanced apprentices: progression from Level 2 to Level 4 and beyond



Case study

**South West Region
Skills and Employer Responsiveness
(SER) programme**

Sector relevance

This case study is aimed at a range of individuals and teams within training provider organisations. It should be of particular interest to all staff in FE colleges, sixth form colleges and private work-based learning providers who are employed in roles designed to promote progression from Apprenticeships to higher education.

Summary

Education + Training Skills (ETS) now has a fully qualified and well-informed information, advice and guidance (IAG) team with the tools to encourage learners to progress to higher-level qualifications and the intended progression rates of their completing advanced apprentices are among the highest in the county. Their engagement with employers has improved; they are offered a far more comprehensive service and they have achieved the Training Quality Standard (TQS).

About ETS

ETS was established in 1968 as a group training organisation for Apprenticeships. Based in Exeter, it currently operates throughout Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, specialising in the occupational delivery areas of business and administration, information technology, customer service, team leading, management and advice and guidance at Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) levels 1-5. The organisation remains firmly committed to the achievement of total business excellence through its determination to maintain its Investor in People status, first awarded in 1995.

The challenge

As a company with a Centre of Vocational Excellence in business administration, high success rates and an above-average proportion of advanced apprentices, ETS has always been keen to offer their employers and learners a full spectrum of training opportunities.

Progression to Level 4 qualifications and beyond by learners who had completed their Advanced Apprenticeships has been low for a long time. Official statistics for 2003/04 showed a 0.23% progression rate into higher education in Devon and in April 2004 an Ofsted joint area review noted: “a failure to promote and identify progression openings to higher education prior to completion within work based learning”.

The activity

The first challenge was to identify why the levels were so low. A staff survey in 2005 revealed that those who were delivering IAG in the work-based learning section had not been in higher education (HE) themselves, so they were being asked to advise on something they had not experienced. Furthermore, HE programmes in the South West that were suitable and available for learners from work-based learning were not

being taken up. Working with Aimhigher, training providers helped to develop a *Study South West Vocational Pathways* booklet backed up by a range of information sheets for learners, staff and employers.

The second challenge was to raise the levels of expertise of the staff delivering IAG. They used the training provider networks as a South West lifelong learning hub and brought in the Next Step careers advice service to deliver a series of basic IAG training programmes. Matrix accreditation followed and ETS then launched a development plan to get all frontline staff to undertake IAG NVQs.

Although these activities helped to increase demand from apprentices and their employers, there was another problem on the supply side. Part-time Foundation Degrees were still quite new and not common in East Devon. This meant ETS had to put pressure on local provision to try to increase the local offer and encourage those seeking to develop new vocational HE programmes. One learner who was completing a part-time IAG Level 4 qualification and was interested in progression to a Foundation Degree found nothing suitable available in Exeter or Plymouth – their preferred course was only available in Cornwall. Fortunately the shortfall in the Exeter area has largely been resolved this year.

A third issue centred on employers' lack of enthusiasm for their apprentices going on to higher education. There was a deep-rooted fear, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises, that if they trained their staff up to HE level the staff would simply move to a bigger business and all the costs of the training would benefit someone else. One member of staff also suggested that a related obstacle to progression was company size; with larger companies able to offer better career progression opportunities:

“The size of the learner’s company is significant for progression if there is an internal staff development route allied to higher level qualifications.”

To counter these fears, ETS are highlighting the economic benefits to a business of either employing graduates straight from higher education or “growing their own”. A campaign is currently being undertaken in conjunction with the Devon and Cornwall Business Council, the local Employment and Skills Boards and the emerging local enterprise partnerships to increase business awareness of HE opportunities. HE providers in the area have been encouraged to work more closely with employers to help focus course projects on the needs of the business, creating a mutually beneficial situation.

While all this work was going on, the new initial teacher training qualifications boosted interest for many employers who delivered some in-house training. They started to develop their own staff, resulting in significant numbers of advanced apprentices progressing to the award in Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector, then the Certificate in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector or the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector. A specific bridging support book was developed with help from the South West Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training to support these learners.

The outcomes

Despite all this activity it has always been hard to obtain accurate information about the progression of apprentices, largely because HE provider application forms ask for the highest previous qualification, usually an NVQ 3, rather than recording undertaking of an Advanced Apprenticeship. The solution was the Advance Project, which was funded by the Devon and Cornwall Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2007, primarily to gather more reliable data on progression.¹ A two-year study of all completing advanced apprentices' future training plans identified high levels of progression aspiration: 38% stated that they planned to go to higher learning after six months; 45% after three years². In ETS's case, this figure was 88%. This compared well with the Devon and Cornwall LSC exit data for 2005/6 apprentice leavers, which showed that only 1.13% expected to progress to higher education with national figures³ suggesting a figure of 2–4%.

The Advance Project was followed by the one-year Aspiration to Achievement (A2A) project funded by the Aimhigher Peninsula Programme to investigate the Advance Project findings in more depth. The new study concentrated on six providers, including ETS, whose learners had the highest aspiration levels. Five of them, including ETS, had achieved the TQS. All the IAG staff were interviewed in an attempt to identify exactly how they were achieving high learner progression rates to Level 4 and above.

Several common themes were identified. The companies tended to be very employer-focused. They had a systematic approach to employer engagement from initial contact through the identification and analysis of business needs to the development of learning provision to address those needs. There was close monitoring of learner progress with the employer, through to a final evaluation of the value of the training and in many cases the achievement of repeat business. This was clearly indicative of the employer focus necessary to achieve the TQS.

The relationship with the employer was key to learner progression and providing “employer information advice and guidance” was seen as an essential part of the process. In this context, the role of the workplace mentor/buddy was also important. The mentor/buddy had often completed the programme themselves, and was able to support the learner appropriately and help apply the learning within their own workplace. Initial contact was invariably made with the employer and it was suggested that this constituted the first IAG session, with the learner needs perhaps secondary:

“The first and possibly the key IAG session is not with the learner but with the employer.” (Member of staff)

¹ AdvAnce Project final newsletter (October 2009)

² Southern, Sutton and Coppock (2009) *The Progression Aspirations of Advanced Apprentices and other Work-Based Learners: An Analysis of Advance Project Findings* SERIO, University of Plymouth

³ Seddon, V (2005) *An Analysis of the Progression of Advanced Apprentices to Higher Education in England*. University Vocational Awards Council. Available at: http://213.5.176.40/~uvacacuk/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/seddon_AAprog.pdf

ETS was one of only three providers that also referred learners to external information sources and used Aimhigher resources, such as vocational pathways booklets and the learn and work website (www.learnandwork.org/) – others were not aware of these. This partly reflected the other providers' focus on internal progression and learner retention, whereas ETS was seen as a company that more often directed learners to other providers and the Open University.

The impact

A2A also studied groups of learners in depth. In terms of IAG relating to progression, the questionnaire indicated that 95% were aware of the progression opportunities beyond Level 3; 66% had been informed of opportunities by ETS; and 25% by their employer. Improving their job opportunities was easily the most common reason learners gave for wanting to study further (71%), followed by increased self esteem (65%); whereas only 29% considered promotion to be a significant factor.⁴

Several of the interviewees felt that mode of delivery was important:

“A key factor in progression to higher education is the flexibility of the programme on offer. Most want evenings/weekends to fit around their job.”

With this in mind ETS created an information sheet spelling out all the options available to the learner who wished to progress in administration (their main business). Highlighting the equivalence of the different qualifications helped learners select the most appropriate route.

By emphasising the opportunities for employers to develop career paths in their own companies and ‘grow their own staff’, ETS has attracted a lot of new and repeat business. The employer and training provider have a very clear pathway in mind before any learner is recruited at Level 2.

Training providers are being asked to increase levels of progression, rather than simply concentrate on movement from Level 2 to Level 3.

Useful links

Further useful information and resources are available from LSIS, particularly in the Skills and Employer Responsiveness section of the LSIS Excellence Gateway www.excellencegateway.org.uk/ser and specifically for the apprenticeships page <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=324342>

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⁴ Watton P, Marshall C and Dismore H. *A2A Final report. From Aspiration to Attainment (A2A): Advanced Apprentice progression beyond a Level 3 qualification*. Available at: www.peninsulaonline.org.uk/resources/A2A.pdf