

APPRENTICESHIP WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: FINAL CASE STUDY

Mental Health in Apprentices: Counting the Cost

South Devon College with City College Plymouth & PETROC

CREATED BY

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 South Devon College **PETROC**



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Mental Health in Apprentices: Counting the Cost

Project Overview

In March of this year, we successfully applied for Apprenticeship Workforce Development funding for our project; Mental Health in Apprentices: counting the cost. South Devon College has been the lead, partnering with City College Plymouth and PETROC. Our project research questions, and the focus of this project have been; What is the impact of poor mental health on apprenticeship retention? What measures could be taken to address this?

We believed poor mental health to be a root cause for a significant proportion of apprenticeship withdrawal. This project has sought to improve the quality and effective practice in the delivery of apprenticeships by;

- Studying recent withdrawal data to understand the scale of the problem.
- Evaluating whether there are any specific challenges regarding mental health.
- Quantifying the cost in terms of lost income
- Piloting approaches to support apprentice mental health

The first phase of the project was a collaborative inquiry in which each partner organization gathered and analysed apprenticeship withdrawal data spanning across the past 3 years. A data set was agreed so that provider level comparisons could be made. During this phase we also investigated how the data was being captured and used. Other data collection for phase one included; identification of good practice in other curriculum areas to inform development and baseline survey data on the mental health of all live apprentices.

The second phase of the project was an impact measurement pilot in which we delivered trial interventions for mental health support. We also created a 'distance travelled' survey to measure individual mental health perception before and after delivery. Interventions included;

South Devon College

- 3-hour Mental Health Awareness workshops
- Additional & specific questions asked at review points by Assessor Coaches

City College Plymouth

- Distribution of electronic and paper-based summer support sheet
- Additional & specific questions asked at review points by Assessor Coaches

PETROC

- Safeguarding team recorded a short video that was circulated and played to apprentices at the beginning of lectures.
- Additional & specific questions asked at review points by Assessor Coaches

Project Aims

The challenge our project was aiming to address was the lower levels of apprentice retention compared to full-time programme learners, speculating that mental health was a root cause for a significant proportion of apprentice withdrawals.

This project aimed to achieve;

- A collaborative inquiry providing a greater understanding of the mental health of apprentices by completing data research of information relating to mental health which has been collected via surveys and conversations.
- An impact measurement of piloted approaches using 'distance travelled' surveys and activities with learners who have benefitted.
- The embedding of ETF Professional Standards within all project activity.

Positive Impact and Expected Outcomes

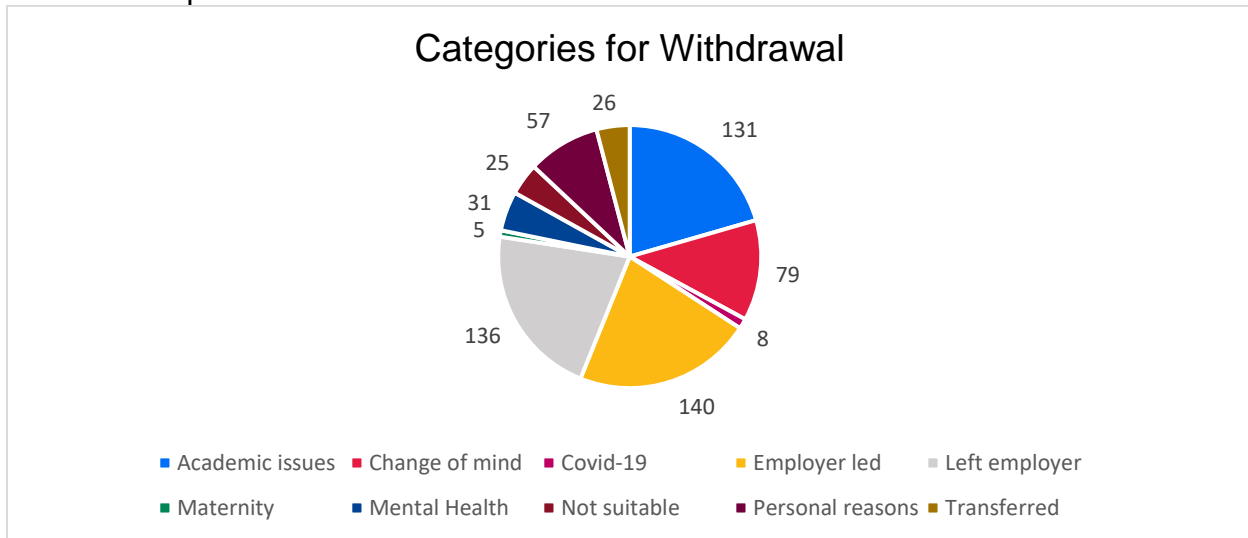
Collaborative Inquiry

The first phase of the project was a collaborative inquiry in which each partner organization gathered and analysed apprenticeship withdrawal data spanning across the past 3 years. A data set was agreed so that provider level comparisons could be made. During this phase we also investigated how the data was being captured and used.

Whilst investigating the causes of apprentice withdrawal across the past three years, we discovered several patterns. We originally hypothesized that mental health would be a root cause and while it is an important factor that should be addressed, the numbers were lower than expected in comparison to withdrawals due to employability concerns. (See final report for breakdowns).

We expected to have clean data, and to be able to pull the reasons for withdrawal by the timeline we set in the bid. However, we spent a significant portion of project duration investing and identifying the reasons for withdrawal as the data we had was not qualitative enough or easily accessible. This barrier therefore limited the amount of time we could

invest in the pilots.



Impact Measurement Pilot

The second phase of the project was an impact measurement pilot in which we delivered trial interventions for mental health support. We also created a 'distance travelled' survey to measure individual mental health perception before and after delivery. Interventions included; 3-hour Mental Health Awareness workshops, additional & specific questions asked at review points by Assessor Coaches, distribution of electronic and paper-based summer support sheet and the showing of a short Safeguarding team video within lessons.

Results from the Interventions show a small but marked improvement of learner perception of their mental health. The project has also identified from the interventions that whilst there is good practice to support all learners across all providers, because of language (e.g., labelling it 'student' support rather than 'apprentice' support) it does not have the same level of visibility and is not, therefore, utilised. (See final report & appendices for detail)

All three partners found that the withdrawal forms have been setup to focus on ILR compliancy tick boxes rather than the gathering of qualitative data. Since it was raised during this project, we have actioned this, mandating a text box is completed, no matter which ILR tick box has been selected. This shift in focus from ILR compliancy to collecting beneficial data enables us to record specific reasons for withdrawal, lifting the veil on root causes. Collating qualitative data ensures that we have the constructive feedback to make changes to improve provision. This is the most critical strategic impact of the project as it will have the biggest influence on future delivery.

The data that was available showed us that whilst mental health is a significant concern to apprentice retention, 'employer led' (dismissal) was a much more common problem. This information has been a completely unexpected outcome of the project and is of significantly high value. The strategic impact from this project finding will be included in our recommendations but further research and investigation is required.

As a large organisation, it can sometimes be difficult to see the bigger picture due to people working in 'silos. With consideration to the project findings, it is imperative that we undertake a strategic review of apprenticeship provision to address quality improvement which focuses on how we reconsider apprentices at the heart of our provision and how we address the myriad issues raised in this project going forward. Whilst we went into this with a focus of mental health, there are many issues causing withdrawal that would effectively be more manageable under increased core support for apprentices.

The emerging impact on apprentices is improved mental health support leading to increased retention on apprenticeship programmes. There is already an improvement to the recruitment process, and to their access to wellbeing support that was not as visible before. There is also a lot of thought going into raising awareness of the resources available so it is not only the full-time students who can easily find help when they need it.

As a result of the project, all partners are beginning to look at a potential restructure of apprenticeship delivery to introduce significant focus on core skills, personal development and support available to equip apprentices with the skills and personal attributes required to successfully complete their apprenticeship. We recognise there is a challenge here for employers, as their focus is on productive staff and therefore core apprenticeship training. To ensure that employers are on board with a changed approach, it is vital to help them understand the value in investing in apprenticeship retention rather than continuing to accept a 40% withdrawal rate and all the business interruption and inconvenience losing an apprentice entail.

Project Outputs

The tangible outputs of this project have been;

- 1 collaborative MS Teams platform (not needed as ETF created one – we used SharePoint instead)
- Concise monthly monitoring
- 1 data analysis document (with categorised breakdowns)
- 3 case studies including best practice reflections (one from each college) – best practice reflections have been inputted into a separate document, forming an additional output.
- 1 suggested approach guidance document for other practitioners on how they could use the findings of our project.
- 1 document which includes the type of support that is currently available which will be shared with apprentices, employers, and other practitioners. (we have created several resources instead of just one)
- 1 business case presented to each project members senior leadership.
- 2 short formative evaluation reports during the project
- 1 final summative evaluation report in September 2023

Future Activity

This project has uncovered an unexpected outcome; 'employer led' withdrawals are alarmingly high. Further work and investigation into this is urgent, possibly branching into a new direction for apprenticeship development / future funding opportunities. Further investigation into employability related apprentice withdrawals is highly recommended. The projects team will be searching for possible funding streams / future rounds of this project to research and develop recommendations to mitigate this issue. Initial ideas would suggest the development of a pre-apprenticeship employability / induction programme to include 'workplace behaviour skills. In the longer term, this would be standardised cross college, relevant CPD and staff upskilling would be developed, resources to support delivery etc.

During the impact pilot, all three partners asked additional and specific mental health questions during apprentice progress reviews. The partnership faced resistance from the staff performing the progress reviews as there was some concern about asking the questions of mental health. This has underlined a need for the upskilling of apprenticeship staff to ensure they feel comfortable to ask the questions and that they are fully aware of the support that is available to signpost to. This action is being implemented and it has been agreed that the questions used for the project will be reassessed but continued with.

Other examples of mental health support for apprentices that have been implemented or are under development include; a wellbeing information email sent to all learners at sign up, 'getting to know you' survey (which includes mental health assessment) will now be used with apprentices as well as other learners, OneFile personal development programme for apprentices will be improved and a more interactive, face-to-face personal development programme for apprentices is under development – though, we are facing barriers such as time-constraints and employer concern.

We must serve employers better as well; we believe that expectation setting during the sign-up period would go a long way towards encouraging an employer mindset that supports apprentice mental health. The statistics show that there is a 40% chance that an apprentice will withdraw from their programme, so it is in the best interest of employers to support a full provision of personal development and mental health support.

"The issues that we have found would not have been found without this project" Project Lead, Antonia Wall.

Recommendations for effective collaborative partnership working to address quality improvement in apprenticeship delivery.

It has been most useful for our partnership to work under complete honesty between providers and share all details / concerns faced.

A collaborative partnership has ensured that the project was successful, co-designing the planning and delivery as well as the survey, tangible outcomes, and interventions.

- *25 managers and 15 other members of staff across the three colleges have an improved understanding of factors affecting apprenticeship withdrawal.*
- *25 managers across the three colleges have an improved understanding of the key factors required to run an organisation effectively regarding quality, financial viability, legislative compliance, and ethical considerations.*
- *40 members of staff (including teachers) across the three organisations have built positive and collaborative relationships with internal stakeholders.*
- *15 teachers across the partnership have continued to promote and support positive learner behaviour, attitudes, and wellbeing.*
- *45 members of staff have improved their understanding of how to promote learner well-being.*

We are planning to continue to address the challenges this project set out to investigate:

"we haven't just done the project then walked away from it. This has opened up a huge amount of work for us all to take forward." – Jon Baglow, PETROC.

Below are the areas of work the project partners hope to continue to develop together in the future to share good practice. The following new outcomes/outputs have been identified to ensure that a more "holistic" approach is implemented going forward:

- Pel; CPD for apprenticeship support staff – highlighting what support is available to apprentices, employers, and the staff themselves.
- Support services should refer separately or inclusively to apprentices (not just students) to ensure everyone knows they are able to access what they need.
- Tailoring of statutory and critical CPD (e.g., safeguarding, review process) to give specific apprenticeship and work-based examples so staff are clearer on how it may relate to them (e.g., making a disclosure in a workplace).



Where can colleagues find more information?

Antonia Wall | Project Lead | South Devon College | antoniawall@southdevon.ac.uk

The projects team at PETROC: projects@petroc.ac.uk

David Wales | City College Plymouth | dwales@cityplym.ac.uk

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