Analysis of interview responses on apprentice engagement

Chris Thomson, Dr Marina Carter and Dave McIntyre

Introduction

Invited students were interviewed by telephone with interviews lasting between 36 minutes and 67 minutes with an average of 49 minutes (See Appendix A).
Eleven primary questions were asked (with some follow up questions where it seemed appropriate) and key points of student responses are collated below attributed to each question.
The available demographics are available in Appendix B.   There were a total of 6 respondents, 17% female, 83% male. 100% of the interviewees had previously participated in the survey.

1.   Can you tell me what your current working arrangements and off the job hours are?

The majority of students interviewed said that they were given 20% (1 day a week). There was little consistency in how that was arranged however, with some being given two allocated half days and others more ad-hoc. In some cases that flexibility worked well but in others it meant that the reality was the 20% was not achieved. In one case the practice tutor stepped in to help resolve ineffective allocation of time.

> ” ... I've got the 20%. I work full time so I get the full seven half hours a week and I take them when I need them to sit in with my study schedule …” (Interviewee B)

> “… currently it is the 20% which for me is 8 hours a week …” (Interviewee D)

> “... I was given 1.5 hours a day ...   my practice tutor stepped in … the Business Development Team with the OU were great as well, they supported the practice tutor … I was given two half days a week …” (Interviewee F)

> “… they are happy to support the apprenticeship … “ (Interviewee F)

Many interviewees commented that they were well supported by their employer.
The constraints of the apprenticeship degree program (which specifies a minimum study intensity) meant that all were required to be signed up to a workload which meant that the allowed 20% of their working time was only a part of their overall study time.

> “ … 20% … which is one day, split over two half days … “ (Interviewee A)

> “ … general guidance for modules … is 8-10 hours per week … I’m essentially being asked to find another 16-20 hours per week … “ (Interviewee A)

As with many non-apprentices, the impact of the pandemic affected some in a positive way and some in a negative. One said that they now had much more flexibility as they were now working from home, another that they still had to attend the office, but it was now a much better working environment.

> "I work for a hospital … during the initial lockdown we were not able to take the full 20% … only when absolutely required … but we banked it … " (Interviewee B)

> "… in some ways its been a lot easier, because I'm working from home I can get my head into my study without being disrupted …" (Interviewee C)

2.   What was the last tutorial you attended?

Most (83%) students interviewed had attended a tutorial in the previous month although one did note that their anxiety meant they rarely attended tutorials.

> " … depending on the tutor, you can sometimes be picked on to answer questions and I find it really awkward … I have anxiety …" (Interviewee B)

3.   How do you decide which tutorial to attend?

Students interviewed aimed to attend session run by their own tutor. Reasons included feeling more attached, but also because that tutor will be marking their work.

Interviewees did look for keywords related to assignments as a justification to attend. "Introduction" was noted as a strong disincentive to attend. Expectations of introductory sessions was that they would contain little content of value.

For assignment sessions students interviewed expected that they would either look at similar questions or otherwise have content which would directly help in preparing their assignment.

The content being different to the description was raised as a problem.

Tutorials attended were generally considered to be of good value.

> " … I will always try to attend the main planning tutorials for the TMA or EMA … these are the most critical for me …" (Interviewee A)

> " … with my specific tutor .. because they are the one marking my assignment …" (Interviewee A)

> " … I tend to go with my tutor first … " (Interviewee B)

" … the subject headings can be misleading … when a tutor posts in the forums to say we have had this now and then you realise that they actually covered something a little bit different or that was not really on the subject …" (Interviewee B)

"… with having two kids … its very difficult to make 10am on a Saturday …" (Interviewee C)

" … any that say EMA or TMA …" (Interviewee D)

"… the feedback I got in TMAs … almost like he was saying 'if you had attended my tutorials you would have known the answer to this…" (Interviewee E)

"…. I've been assigned a tutor … they will be marking my TMAs … gets me into the way they are thinking about the subject …" (Interviewee E)

" … I try and book with my tutor … if I'll book with another tutor … I can at least get some of the knowledge from another tutor … " (Interviewee F)

"… mainly the decision is based on timings … if I can choose my tutor … the benefit of my own tutor …" (Interviewee F)

4. How do you prepare for tutorials?

All students interviewed commented that it was either very unusual or unknown for tutors to send preparatory work in advance of a session. Preparation was mainly trying to be more or less up to date in study and/or having read the assignment in advance.

" … from what I can remember I haven't had any preparatory work … " (Interviewee A)

" … with the Uni. so remote based … tutorials can get a bit lost in what they are actually there for … I wouldn't know how motivated I'd be to do work for a tutorial I might not be able to attend …" (Interviewee B)

" … I don't recall any that have sent material in advance … " (Interviewee C)

"… for the majority I've not had any prep material … only one I've had it for … I found that quite useful … " (Interviewee D)

" … I try to make sure I'm up to where will be covered … " (Interviewee E)

5. Can you describe your experience in attending live online tutorials?

Mostly this was positive, some noted that it was becoming increasingly common to find their microphones disabled throughout a tutorial and that made them feel their contribution was limited.

Issues with Adobe Connect were raised, but it was not entirely clear whether those were issues with the product or expectation. One commented that they preferred the way Khan Academy presents material, but that is really comparing a video lecture with a tutorial. Possibly this arises because many tutorials are primarily presentational and possibly some of those would be better served by investing in producing one good video.

Text chat was considered a positive as was voting and annotating whiteboards. Few had experienced breakout sessions. Screensharing was welcomed.

To help focus, several mentioned using headphones. That did suggest that they were attending in situations likely to have distractions and may go some way to explaining a reluctance to engage using microphones.

> " … for the most part very relevant … very beneficial …" (Interviewee A)

> " … sometimes there is slide overkill … you would not have to watch the video back … with 106 slides you know its all in the pack … " (Interviewee A)

> " … a couple of occasions where mics were not enabled … means I have to relay my message in the chat box … buy Gigabit broadband for every tutor … " (Interviewee A)

> " … because of the amount of material they have to get through … they can get a bit lost … in a tutor and a group of students having a conversation …" (Interviewee B)

> " … only five of us attended … and there is that fear that you are going to be picked on …" (Interviewee B)

> " … I've got everything I needed out of them … " (Interviewee C)

> " … good … quite informative … give a voice to your tutor … " (Interviewee C)

> " … I've found it all very positive … sometimes the tutor will have issues at their end …" (Interviewee D)

> " … when I do miss them I do view the recordings … " (Interviewee E)

> " … descriptions of tutorials did not always match what was covered … " (Interviewee E)

" … I want to write on a whiteboard when its pertinent to what we are studying, I don't want to write on a whiteboard to say 'my name is …' " (Interviewee E)

".. I think having a break in a tutorial is useful … " (Interviewee E)

" … sometimes I might be sitting in the living room with my other half is watching TV because we are sharing space, I'll have my headphones in so she does not hear the tutorials and at the same time I'm not distracted by the telly …" (Interviewee F)

6.   Can you provide some examples of how you have participated in tutorials?

Primarily by chat box. One noted that TG tutorials were more interactive.

" .. emoticons work well …" (Interviewee B)

" … I prefer to type it in … " (Interviewee C)

" … I've got a desk in one of the bedrooms and shut the door… at work I'll pop into the boardroom …" (Interviewee D)

" … I use the text chat because if gives the tutor time to respond … " (Interviewee D)

"… only happened in one session … we had a breakout session … I thought that was quite useful …" (Interviewee D)

" … a lot of tutorials have relied on chat … " (Interviewee E)

" … I don't like to be heard … " (Interviewee E)

" … tutor group tutorials have probably had a lot more interaction … because people …. Have been dealing with each other and its always the same people … " (Interviewee E)

7.   How does your employer support your attendance at tutorials?

The majority of employers allowed attendance in work time and so apprentices valued daytime sessions. They noted that colleagues were generally very supportive.

" … typically they (tutorials) are evening … they don't really need to support me because they don't need to … one of my tutorials was scheduled for a Saturday evening … and that is a rubbish time …" (Interviewee A)

" … I've had two very different experiences because I changed jobs … " (Interviewee B)

" … people are quite inquisitive because they just want to know what is involved … " (Interviewee C)

" … (colleagues) understand …   two of the others are OU students …." (Interviewee D)

8. In the survey face to face tutorials were described as being important for interaction for a tutor, peer interaction for discussion, and an opportunity for dedicated study time without distraction. How do these aspects relate to online tutorials?

Of those who had previously attended face-face sessions it was noted that the geographical distribution was often inconvenient although as a positive, they also acknowledged that it was easier to build rapport in face-face session.

" … there is nothing to encourages interaction with your peers .. (referring to online sessions)" (Interviewee B)

" … day school sessions longer … having longer sessions was helpful … " (Interviewee D)

9. Can you describe your experience in watching recorded online tutorials?

Several commented positively ranging from that this was 'quite good' to 'fantastic', however some discussed limitations of the player. That, together with lack of any kind of indexing can make it tedious to view recordings. Some felt that recordings were more valuable had you attended. One commented that it was frustrating because you could not interact with a recording, but it is difficult to see any remedy to that.

" … good … can be a lot of waffle especially at the beginning and the end … I think Adobe now has a new feature where the presenter can label bits … I do find them for the most part really, really helpful … " (Interviewee B)

" … since the software has been updated I find it harder to skip through … " (Interviewee D)

" … if I pause it … and leave it for a while … the screen goes blank and you have to restart which then reloads back to the start … so you have to find your place again …" (Interviewee D)

" … typically I'll play back the ones I've been to …"   (Interviewee E)

" … sometimes the most frustrating thing in the world because you can't interact with them … " (Interviewee E)

" … watching an entire recording can be frustrating …" (Interviewee E)
"… recordings are very, very useful, but not a substitute for doing the live tutorials … " (Interviewee E)

" … you've lost the personal touch … tutors don't really know what the students are doing … " (Interviewee F)

10. In your opinion what elements of a tutorial should be recorded?

The majority felt all sessions should be recorded with a minority suggesting only presentational elements, but not open discussion or Q&A.   No one felt that there was any reason that a session should not be recorded.

" … it's cut-off before the questions at the end … I do find some of the feedback around those questions at the end is quite important – and they get lost … some of those Q&As are more important than the main session … " (Interviewee A)

" … I think it should just be the slides element .." (Interviewee B)

" … I do think when they do the Q&A session I agree with it not being recorded … " (Interviewee B)

" … all of the presenting bit should be recorded …tutors often stop the recording before people ask questions … often some of the important information is through people asking questions and the tutors responding …. In some respects, it would be good to have those parts recorded …" (Interviewee D)

" … I don't think so (that I'd be influenced to not ask a question because the session was being recorded …" (Interviewee D)

"… I don't have an issue and you could record it all for me … " (Interviewee E)

" … record it from the very start to the very end … " (Interviewee E)

" … if gives you that ability to go back and reflect and understand the concepts … " (Interviewee F)

" … definitely the formal start and finish … " (Interviewee F)

" … you've got to appreciate that not many people will feel comfortable asking questions whilst they know that they are being recorded … " (Interviewee F)

11. Is there anything we could do to better meet your needs in terms of tutorial provision?

It was felt that this depends on the module, but overall more choice is better. Several mentioned having more sessions would be better, but without knowing the modules they were comparing to, its not really possible to know how many that equates to. It was felt there could be better structure, although this varies considerably by module. Some mention was made of Adobe Connect issues, but these students would have experienced it when there were very significant issues, which are now largely resolved. One student noted that later is better, say starting at 9pm.

It was noted that when downloading a calendar, the descriptions do not include the module code as a prefix which makes them difficult to work with when imported.

" … when you have the opportunity to download your calendar there is no prefix of the module code in the description … " (Interviewee A)

" … some tutors are quite good at sending out a reminder that a session is coming up … but I might have missed one because I have not had a reminder … you could email all of your students all at once and say 'there is a session coming up…' …" (Interviewee A)

" … a bit of lack of structure in connection to tutors …" (Interviewee B)

"   .. I have to say the Adobe Connect software … I think a lot of the distraction comes from that … I think when you are doing an IT degree and you get IT specialists struggling with a web software … its such a bad software … every tutorial you spend the first 10 or 15 minutes trying to make sure everyone is on, the slides are up, they are moving through properly … " (Interviewee B)

" … I have experience of other software …. but Adobe Connect … even on a 1-1 .. has been such a bad experience for me …   it is actually a barrier to attend a tutorial …" (Interviewee B)

" … a colleague … using video …   having something which is almost like a live classroom … makes you focus a bit more … " (Interviewee B)

" … having lots of choice … at different times …" (Interviewee D)

" … the only thing that I find frustrating about the tutorial is Adobe Connect, in principle it looks like the perfect tool … it just seems very flaky at times … people losing sound … " (Interviewee E)

" … Adobe disconnects, I don't like it … the reason I don't like it because when you have a tutorial going … you've got someone putting their hand up, you've got someone doing something in the chat session, you've got the tutor that's flicking backwards and forward through presentations, sometimes the network stability is not really there …" (Interviewee E)

" … video … allows you engage fully …" (Interviewee E)

Discussion

The results of the interviews allow some useful observations may be made:

All of the students interviewed said that they were well supported by employers, but even then, have a heavy workload in their own time.

All of the students interviewed said that they did attend some tutorials (this could be verified from attendance records). It is suspected that attendance will vary greatly between modules. Anxiety is a repeated factor deterring attendance. This is something which is commonly said by students and may be worthy of exploring why students feel anxiety about attending. Is their perception different to reality?

It should be accepted that in general, students favour tutorials by their own tutor. This seems very relevant for Group Tuition Policy (GTP) which requires students to attend sessions by other tutors or have no support for some elements. Tutorial naming has a significant effect on attendance, avoid "introduction".

Consider whether any preparatory work should be sent, also make it clear what needs to be prepared (if anything).

Microphones should be enabled by default, even if not used. They can be disabled if necessary. This is an important point as it seems increasingly tutors are muting and being encouraged to mute due to previous bugs causing sound issues.

Text chat, whiteboard annotation, screensharing and polling are all popular and should be continued. Several features were not mentioned and it was clear students had not (or had rarely) experienced breakout rooms, video (recorded or live) or audio clips, shared website tours, Q&A pods. There does appear to be a lack of confidence in AC amongst many tutors and a reluctance to try more advanced features.

Whilst Chat seems dominant, it may be worth exploring other interactions. In particular also to ask what might make a Tutor Group session more interactive.

It was excellent to hear that many employers are very supportive and a tribute to the commitment of employers. As a whole the University should take every opportunity to highlight the important role of employers in Apprentice Degrees.

There remains a very definite benefit to face-face over online communication and we should not lose sight of that despite the improvements to online provision made during the pandemic. The geographical challenges are very real and will mean that it is impossible for some students to attend a face-face session. We should consider combined face-face/online sessions where practical.

There is a clear desire to either enhance the player to incorporate more flexible playback options or permit download of the MP4 version of the recordings so that local players may be used.

Students clearly wanted recordings. There was no evidence of any reluctance to be recorded by any student.

Students sought flexibility and choice in scheduling with as wide a range of times and days for tutorials as possible.

Recommendations

Four areas are identified where it may be possible to enhance student attendance and experience of tutorials.

Communication enhancements

- Inform students what to expect in a tutorial to reduce anxiety.
- Communicate the content of the tutorial in advance to align student expectations with reality.
- Inform students what a session will entail allows them to use their time most effectively – attending sessions which will help them whilst avoiding those they do not need.
- Avoid "introductory" in session names as this may discourage attendance, increase the use of "assignment" as this encourages attendance and avoid vague names like "Block n" as this does not help students decide to attend (or not).
- Individual tutors should promote their own sessions to their own students as this is the path of least resistance.
- Tutors should either send preparatory work, or advise where it is best to be in study plan. This could be included in the session description.

Scheduling changes

- For face-face sessions (when they return) consider running dual online/face-face sessions. There has always been a dilemma about making a connection at the venue, but first that has become easier and second, if we allocate two tutors to a session, one online and one face-face, then if the connection fails, the sessions can continue independently.
- Schedule as wide a range of days and times for tutorials as practical and not hold to the historic weekday evenings and Saturday daytimes.

Improve tutorial experience

- Tutors should be encouraged to enable microphones despite their low usage.
- The use of whiteboard annotation, chat and screensharing seems well established and effective – that should all be encouraged.

- Polling seems less used, but popular and should be promoted.
- Tutors should be encouraged to build confidence with web tours, video and audio clips, live video and breakout rooms and to use these where appropriate. PALS offer regular refresher training in these.
- We should retain a desire to have interactivity. Chat is super, but quite limited, tutors should encourage other participation where practical.

Recording

- Record session wherever possible
- Record the whole session including end questions
- Consider some form of indexing sessions, possibly starting specific topics at specific times or breaking recordings into multiple parts.
- It would be good if the player were more flexible (it is understood a new player is due for release soon) or downloads of MP4 files permitted to allow local players to be used.
- Although not raised here, it has been mentioned many times by students that being able to take the recording offline (downloads of MP4 files) would be valuable.   That is certainly essential for many of those in secure establishments, but also seafarers and some of those working overseas where data connections can be constrained to certain times.

Conclusion

There are many important messages to be received from the students here.   There are certainly elements of what we are doing which meet their needs well, but there are many opportunities to develop our practice to better align with their needs.
Some changes to practice would take minimal work and but could clearly have worthwhile impact and it is strongly recommended that readers reflect on their own practice and seek to implement change to improve the student experience.

Appendix A

Interview durations

Reference	Duration (minutes)
A	57
B	48
C	36
D	43
E	43
F	67

Total duration 295 minutes giving an average of 49 minutes.

Appendix B

Demographics

Reference	Completed Survey	Gender
A	Yes	Male
B	Yes	Female
C	Yes	Male
D	Yes	Male
E	Yes	Male
F	Yes	Male

100% of interviewees had completed the survey

17% of interviewees were female, 83% were male.