Survey on tutorials attendance for apprentices

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Abstract

The survey highlighted that the apprentice learners valued the online tutorials over face to face due to issues including the ease of access and concerns related to coronavirus. Whilst many learners could attend tutorials on weekday daytimes, not all could. Most could attend in the evenings and only one at weekends. Work and life commitments both prevented engagement with most students joining from home during the pandemic. This diversity is not unlike that seen in our non-apprentice learner cohorts.

Introduction

At the Open University (OU) we are still learning about the best way to support our apprentice learners in their academic study. Degree Apprentices are learners in full time employment with study funded through the apprenticeship levy and other government sources. Apprentices in undergraduate programmes in the school of Computing and Communications at the Open University study 90 credits a year in England and Wales and 120 credits a year in Scotland. They are provided with 20% of their paid time to study, about 1 working day a week. Many students use this time, during the working day as their main study time.

In this research we investigated how apprentice learners engage with synchronous online tutorials and the barriers they face to participation. This research report focuses on a survey completed in November 2020.

This survey focuses on the understanding the motivation that apprentices must attend tutorials at certain times and for certain topics. Anecdotally evening and weekend attendance at tutorials is an issue for some apprenticeship students. Thus daytime tutorials have been suggested as apprentices may be able to join during work hours, but for this to effective most apprentices would need to be available at the same time.

However, it is not only apprentices who study during weekday daytimes, other groups such as shift workers and those who care for others also have an interest in tutorials at this time. Therefore, the findings here may have boarder applicability.

Previous work

A pilot on the module TMXY130 (Introduction to Computing technologies) with the 2019 October cohort, which is one of the first modules apprentices' study, had interesting findings (Thomson et. al., 2020). 16% of tutorials (1 of every topic) were during work hours with the same tutor, with that tutor also providing a tutorial repeated identically in the evening of the same day. The initial findings were that workday tutorials were significantly better attended. We found that where this choice was given 63%-84% apprentices decided to attend during the day (Figure 1).
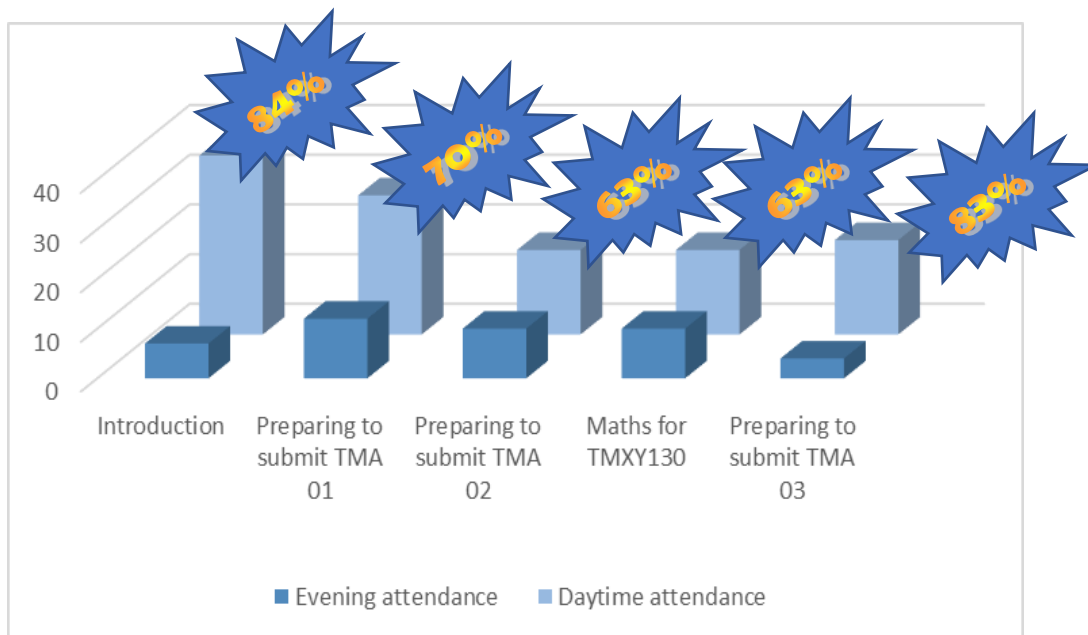
Figure 1. When do students attend tutorial repeats.

Whilst this time is clearly preferable to apprentices it is not clear if this is only because it is during the day, maybe the evening tutorials were too early. It is also unclear how effectively apprentices can participate, particularly if they are joining from a busy office. We also don't know if this is a response to the particular module and tutor involved.

Non apprentices have also shown preferences as seen in other projects. Maths and stats (Thomas, 2019 & Pawley, 2020) have provided weekday tutorials for non-apprentices, but the take up has been much less than the apprentices. Earlier work by Crisp et.al. (2019) supports the view students have varied preferences. Neither project was able to predict why students made their choices, highlighting the range of student feedback received.

Research method

A survey instrument was created and distributed to apprentices 178 on R24 (154) and R40(24) with 91 excluded for various reasons. A complete set of questions can be found in Appendix 2, which includes questions which were used for a related research project. Twenty-five responses were received, and their answers are summarised in Appendix 1. The survey was sent by email and presented on the JISC online survey platform, the learners received two reminders to take part. The survey was distributed in November 2020.

We used a mixture of closed and open answer questions with a preference for open answer as we were not confident of the kind of answers we would get.

Questions 2-8 are demographic in nature, they identify where the apprentice is in their degree, the external commitments, employer sector and how their employer was supporting their apprenticeship. The respondents came from a range of situations but were biased towards those in years 1 or 2 of their study. We don't have a set of demographic information for our apprentices overall so we cannot confirm if those who responded are representative.

The questions were developed drawing on the previous work of Thomas (2019), Pawley (2020) and Crisp et al. (2019) which pointed towards the factors which determine interest in tutorials. This earlier work provided the key themes: timing around when students get home from work; length

and style which were a concern for interruption and concentration; the technical issues covered; use of video which was preferred. Questions 9-17 focus on practice tutors and were used for a different research project Questions 18-25 focused on the respondents' experience of tutorials. We looked at three aspects, when tutorials should be, barriers to attending tutorials, and what the respondents valued about tutorials. Allowing open answers for the apprentices to use their own voice.

Question 26 allowed respondents to mention anything else they wanted us to know about and 8 gave further details.

For free text answers we followed the process of thematic coding as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). As there were relevantly few responses (25) and in each question most responses were 1 to 2 sentences in length the coding applied was simplistic in nature. The goal was to identify the unique explanations (themes) in each answer in order to get a feel for how many students had similar experiences.

The number of times a theme is mentioned cannot be treated in a qualitative way. The sample is not necessarily representative of apprentices studying the qualifications nor were the respondents focused on these issues which may or may not have resonated with more respondents had we asked them about them directly. What this does allow us to do is group unique themes and gain some insight into how widespread those themes are in the wider population.

Analysis

Demographics

The respondents were primarily studying R24, with only 2 studying R40. The spread of pathways within R24 was not representative of the learners on those pathways. However, as the majority of respondents were in years 1 and 2, they would not have started their pathway or qualification specific modules at this time. As a result, the responses can be considered as if they were homogeneous across both the qualifications and pathways.

32% of the respondents had caring responsibilities as part of a young family, whereas the remainder did not report caring responsibilities. Young families can lead to learners wanting or needing to focus on others needs before their own, suggesting this group would be less likely to study in early evenings or weekends. This fits in with the positive aspects of study in work hours with 44% reporting the benefits to work life balance and 24% reporting that it is less distracting.

The most common employment sector was the service industry (36%) which is unsurprising as software and IT companies would fit into this category. These businesses tend to be driven around customer needs, but have less shared busy times, unlike for example retail where most organisations are busy around the Christmas period which would have otherwise skewed perceptions given the timing of this survey. 8% of the respondents were in the health care sector which is broadly representative of our total cohort of 11% suggesting that covid did not lead to these apprentices taking place.

52% of apprentices have flexible study time, with the reminder having set days for study, the most common day is Friday (30%).

40% of apprentices did not have issues studying during work hours, 32% however reported that defined duties made study difficult and 20% unexpected duties made study difficult.

Tutorial experience

When directly asked 25% of all the surveyed apprentices would attend weekday daytime tutorials, which indicates that learners don't feel they can make use of their Off the Job time to attend tutorials. Perhaps it was that existing tutorial times did not work for them as 36% indicated having more daytime options would be helpful. The majority can attend evening tutorials, particularly on weekdays (92%). The question was not specific about if this was that they had attended or if they could attend, and if repeated Q18 should be rephrased to make this distinction clearer.

Most apprentices (76%) would prefer to attend tutorials from home. That few apprentices can join from work may be a result of Covid-19. Most were working from home at the time of the survey, and so would join from home. The Q19 perhaps needs to be rephrased once the pandemic is over to investigate this point further. In the free text responses, it was clear that many of apprentices had been affected by the pandemic in various ways.

The most common reasons for not attending tutorials are due to planned working or family commitments. Unplanned work and family commitments were less common reasons. This suggests that tutorials that offer appropriate tutorials scheduled at the right time should attract apprentices as long as they are able to plan around known commitments.

The respondents indicated that the main benefits for choosing a tutorial were around managing their work/life balance (45%) and avoiding distractions (36%). The most frequently perceived benefits were getting help with assignments (71%) and gaining a greater depth of understanding (21%).

We made clear that travel would be required to get to face to face tutorials, so it is surprising 44% of apprentices would be interested in attending face to face tutorials. In the free text comments apprentices did note however that worries about Covid-19 would mean that they would not travel, and equally the length of tutorial was important to ensure that the travel time was worthwhile.

Other comments

Eight responses provided further comments picking up on various other concerns. This included concerns about the content of the modules and qualification and what the university requires apprentices to do. There was also some praise for members of staff who had made a difference.

In terms of tutorials one comment stood out: *"There is a lot of inconsistencies between different tutors and no set style or template for presentations delivered."* Which illustrates that content matters, learners want to know what they will get if they invest time in tutorials.

Summary and Conclusions

When tutorials should be: The respondents to the survey were mostly 1st and 2nd year students, of which 32% had caring responsibilities. Most were provided with flexible study time which they could use during work hours. However, the majority prefer to attend tutorials from home, although this may have been due to the effects of Covid-19.

Barriers to attending tutorials: The most common barriers to attending tutorials were around planned work and family commitments, although the effects of the pandemic also caused issues to some learners. Face to face tutorials were considered valuable, but travel time was a concern. Learners also selected tutorials that promoted work/life balance and where they were less lightly to be distracted.

Valued aspects of tutorials: Respondents valued tutorials most in terms of gaining help with assignments and gaining a greater depth of understanding.

Recommendations:

Apprentices are not unlike our non-apprentice learners in terms of what they expect from tutorials. Providing clear guidance on the content and how it will help them develop their knowledge is important.

Time is considered valuable, both to be applied effectively to learning, but also to promote a work/life balance. Tutorials should therefore be scheduled at appropriate times and locations to maximise the learning opportunity.

However, a large minority of apprentices do value weekday daytime tutorials. We should therefore provide a range of tutorial times to suit different individual preferences in meeting the above goals.

Next steps: It would be valuable to repeat this survey with improved questions outside of the Covid-19 pandemic to better understand the relationship between learning in the office and at home. Interviewing apprentices could add greater depth of understanding to the findings.

References

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Appendix 1 – Questions and Answers

This appendix contains the data collected from the questions relevant to this report

2. Please tell us which degree programme you are on:

Each respondent selected one answer from a predefined list.

N = 25

R24 (Cyber Security Specialist) – 7

R24 (Software Engineer) – 7

R24 (Undecided or unsure) - 4

R24 (Data Analyst) – 4

R40 (Applied Software Engineering) -2

R24 (Network Engineer) - 1

3. Please confirm your current modules:

Each respondent selected the modules they studied from a predefined list and then the year of study was determined from this.

N = 25

Year 1 - 10

Year 2 - 10

Year 3 - 4

Year 4 – 1

4. So we can better understand your commitments outside work please select the phrase that best describes your living arrangements?

Each respondent selected one answer from a predefined list.

N = 25

I live with my parents -11

I live with my young family - 8

I live by myself -3

I live with my partner -2

I live in shared accommodation -1

5. What sector is your employer in?

Respondents selected from free text, in the analysis the most related sector weas identified. Service in this sense typically refers to a firm that's primary focus is to develop software.

N = 25

Service - 9

Energy – 3

Manufacturing -2

Government -2

Healthcare -2

Retail -1

**6. Do you have a regular study time provided during work hours? (Please select all that apply)**

Each respondent selected multiple answer from a predefined list, including a list of days. However it is clearer in retrospect to divide this into defined days and flexible days. Further detail is included in the graph below.

N = 25

Flexible – 13

Defined – 12

6. Do you have a regular study time provided during work hours? (Please select all that apply)
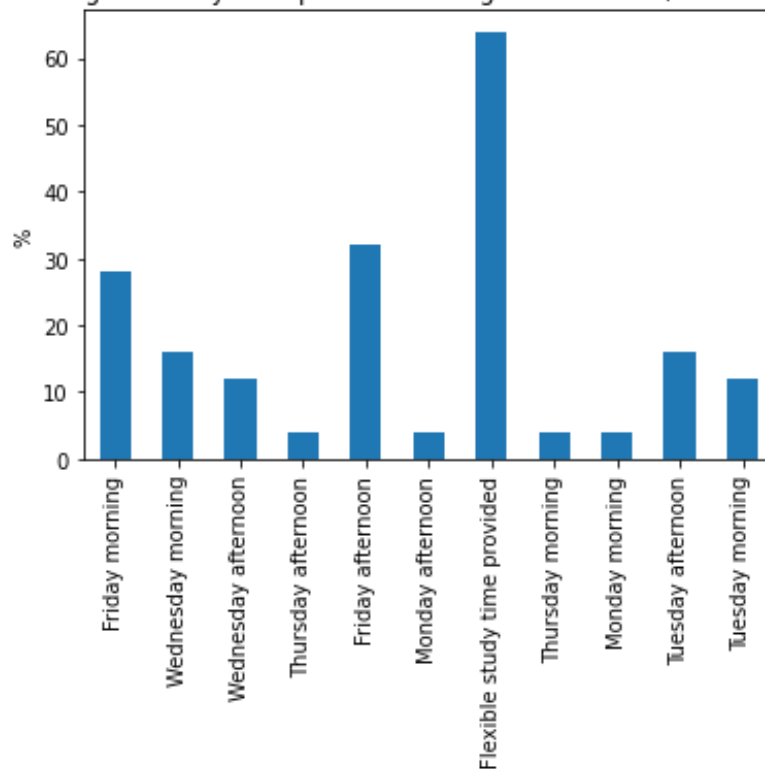
7. What has prevented or got in the way of study during work hours?

This was a free text answer where the answers have been placed into themes. Therefore, each respondent may have had more than one answer.

N = 25

Nothing - 10

Work duties with defined times/deadlines – 8

Unexpected work commitments – 5

Covid-19 – 2

Scheduling difficulties - 1

8. Can you tell us about the positive aspects of study during work hours?

This was a free text answer where the answers have been placed into themes. Therefore, each respondent may have had more than one answer.

N = 25

Work/life balance – 11

Less distracting – 6

Easier to plan study – 4

Employer support – 3

Variety of working day - 2

Colleague support – 1

Essential – 1

18. When can you attend tutorials? (Please select all that apply)

Respondents could select more than one item from a set list.

N = 25

Weekday evening – 23

Weekend daytime -15

Weekend evening – 15

Weekday afternoon – 7

Weekday morning – 4

19. Ideally where do you prefer to attend online tutorials from?

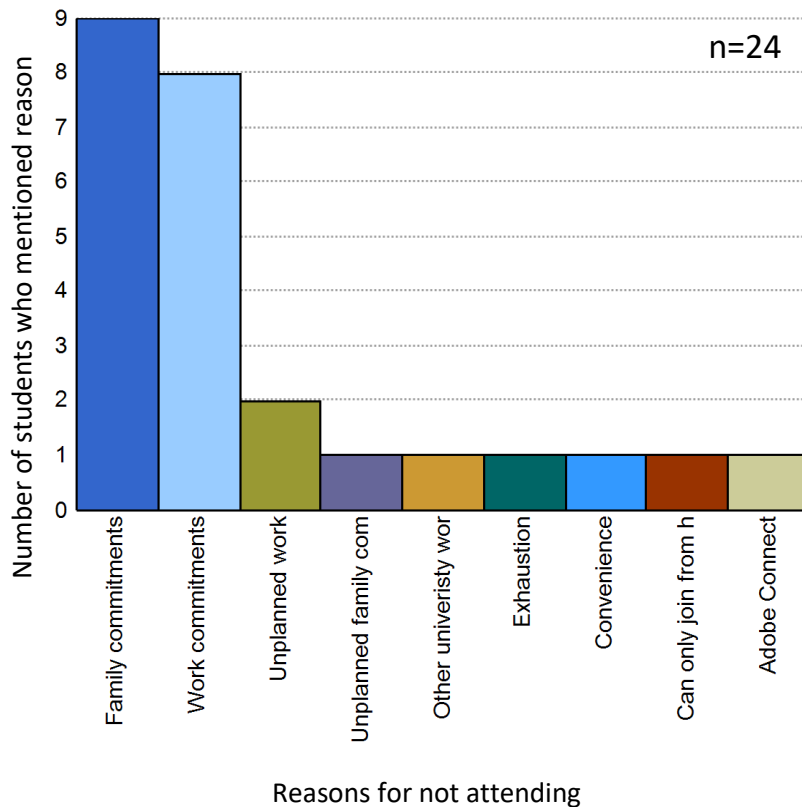Each respondent selected one answer from a predefined list.

N = 25,

Home – 19,

Work – 3,

Both – 3

20. What prevents you attending your preferred tutorial time?

This was a free text answer where the answers have been placed into themes. Therefore, each respondent may have had more than one answer.

Reasons for not attending

21. What are the benefits of your preferred tutorial time?

This was a free text answer where the answers have been placed into themes. Therefore, each respondent may have had more than one answer.

N=22

Work/Life balance – 10

Avoid distractions – 8

Correct hardware – 1

Number of options – 2

Prepare – 2

22. What did you take away from the tutorials that you have attended?

This was a free text answer where the answers have been placed into themes. Therefore, each respondent may have had more than one answer.

N=24

Help with the assignment – 17

Greater depth of understanding – 5

Guidance and reassurance – 3

Variable between tutors – 3

Overview of module and assessment – 3

Peer feedback – 1

Knowledge relating to the module – 1

23. We often only have limited options for weekday daytime tutorials. Would having more times be helpful?

Each respondent selected one answer from a predefined list.

N = 25, Yes – 9, No – 16

24. Would you be interested in attending a face to face tutorial in the future?

Each respondent selected one answer from a predefined list.

N= 25, Yes – 11, No - 14

25. What would influence your decision to attend a face to face tutorial?

This was a free text answer where the answers have been placed into themes. Therefore, each respondent may have had more than one answer.

N=23

Location/Travel time – 16

Availability at time – 5

Concerns about covid - 4

Content – 4

Opportunity for discussion - 2

26. If you have any comments or reflections about any aspects of your degree apprenticeship so far, please tell us in the text box below.

This was a free text answer where the answers have been placed into themes. Therefore, each respondent may have had more than one answer.

N = 8

Concerns about the content of modules - 3

Concerns about the structure of the qualification - 2

Concerns about university requirements -2

Concerns about tutorial content -1

Praise about tutors – 1

Praise about the qualification and support in general – 1

Appendix 2 – Full questionnaire

1. Please tick the box below [to confirm agreement with privacy statement]

2. Please tell us which degree programme you are on.

3. Please confirm your current modules:

4. So we can better understand your commitments outside work please select the phrase that best describes your living arrangements?

5. What sector is your employer in?

6. Do you have a regular study time provided during work hours? (Please select all that apply)

7. What has prevented or got in the way of study during work hours?

8. Can you tell us about the positive aspects of study during work hours?

9. Have you read the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours described in your Degree Apprenticeship Standard or Framework?

10. Please tell us the reasons why you decided to study on a degree apprenticeship.

11. In your view, will your degree apprenticeship benefit you:

11.1.a. In terms of job security (current job)

11.2.a. In terms of job security (future career)

11.3.a. As an opportunity for progression and promotion

11.4.a. Financially

11.5.a. In terms of personal enrichment

12. Which of the statements below best reflects how you feel about your degree apprenticeship? Please select one option.

13. Please rank the following in order of importance:

13.1. Providing an introduction and ongoing information about your degree apprenticeship

13.2. Helping with study skills (eg. Planning your time, numeracy, literacy)

13.3. Helping with managing your workload

13.4. Providing encouragement and support

13.5. Having the opportunity to discuss how things are going on a regular basis

13.6. Having a dedicated person who you can raise problems with

13.7. Showing you how the modules you are studying relate to the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours that define your degree apprenticeship.

13.8. Providing information and advice about module content, both your current module and future modules

14. If there other types of support that you would like your practice tutor to provide, please tell us about them below.

15.

15.1.a. Do you understand why you have regular progress reviews?

15.2.a. Do you understand why you, your line manager and your Practice Tutor need to sign off progress reviews?

16. Please tell us in two or three sentences how you feel that you benefit from your regular progress reviews.

17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, please select one option per statement.

17.1. I enjoy learning on my modules

17.2. I find the assessments interesting

17.3. I feel supported by my practice tutor

17.4. I feel supported by my employer

17.5. Overall, I am enjoying my degree apprenticeship

18. When can you attend tutorials? (Please select all that apply)

19. Ideally where do you prefer to attend online tutorials from?

20. What prevents you attending your preferred tutorial time?

21. What are the benefits of your preferred tutorial time?

22. What did you take away from the tutorials that you have attended?

23. We often only have limited options for weekday daytime tutorials. Would having more times be helpful?

24. Would you be interested in attending a face to face tutorial in the future?

25. What would influence your decision to attend a face to face tutorial?

26. If you have any comments or reflections about any aspects of your degree apprenticeship so far, please tell us in the text box below.

27. We would like to invite some respondents to take part in an interview to explore your answers further. If you are selected the interview will take place online and you will receive a voucher as a thank you for your time.

27.1.a. Would you like to participate in an interview to allow us to find out more about the support given by your practice tutor of up to an hour?

27.2.a. Would you like to participate in an interview to allow us to find out more about why you attend tutorials of up to an hour?