

NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP WEEK: WHAT LIES BEHIND THE SUCCESS STORIES?

Jagdeep Soor - Executive Director of the Multicultural Apprenticeship and Skills Alliance

Good morning everyone and welcome to National Apprenticeship Week 2025 and our webinar, What lies behind the success stories of apprenticeships? Apprenticeships develop the skills, knowledge and behaviours that allow employees to succeed and thrive in their workplace, but how they are utilised varies from employer to employer. So let's hear from our stellar group of panel experts today. We will be going into apprenticeships and more detailed information around that. So welcome everyone, my name is Jagdeep Soor. I'm Executive Director of the Multicultural Apprenticeship and Skills Alliance. We work for an organisation that really promotes equality, diversity, inclusivity and social mobility in apprenticeships, predominantly for marginalised communities. I'll introduce you to our guests first, can I go across to Mark Cameron from The 5% Club?

Mark Cameron - Chief Executive of The 5% Club

Hello, good morning all. Mark Cameron, I'm the Chief Executive of The 5% Club. We're a employer movement that looks to inspire positive employer action for increased accessible and inclusive workplace learning opportunity for all. And clearly a significant part of our membership's activities is in the apprenticeship space. So delighted to be here this morning to support this event with The Open University and looking forward to a rich discussion. Thanks, Jagdeep.

Jagdeep Soor

It's great to have you here Mark, and Louise Timperley.

Louise Timperley - Apprenticeship Manager at the Co-op

Yes, good morning everybody. Thanks, Jagdeep. I'm Louise Timperley, Apprenticeship Manager at the Co-op. Most of you will have heard of the Co-op. We're a large retail, funeral services, legal services and insurance employer. We've got over 55,000 colleagues across the UK, and we employ a high number of apprentices across our business as well. So I'm very happy to join the discussion today, thank you.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you Louise, great to have you. Hazel and Claire.

Hazel Ostle - Workforce Transformation and Development Manager at Durham County Council

Hi there, bear with me, my job title has changed very recently. I'm Hazel Ostle I believe my job title is Workforce Transformation and Development Manager these days, for Children and People Services.

Claire Brown - Workforce Lead for Social Work Education at Durham County Council

Hello, my name is Claire Brown. I am a qualified social worker, and I currently work as a Workforce Lead for Social Work Education. And myself and Hazel, we are involved in the planning and the recruitment and support of our social work trainees who are currently doing the apprenticeship with The Open University.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you, it's wonderful to have you Claire and Hazel. And last but by no means least, can I pass you across to Craig?

Craig Jackson - Head of Apprenticeship Services at The Open University

Hi Jagdeep. Morning everybody, my name's Craig Jackson. I'm Head of Apprenticeship Services at The Open University. We deliver apprenticeships to approximately 3,500 apprentices across a variety of different sectors. So business sector, leadership and management sector, health sector and the digital sector.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you, wonderful to have you here Craig. What we'll start with, is to discuss what needs to be in place at the start of an apprenticeship journey and what fundamentals really need to be in place. So Craig, if I can come across to you and ask you, what are the regulatory requirements that employers need to be aware of?

Craig Jackson, Head of Apprenticeship Services at The Open University

I think the first thing to mention is the fact that apprenticeships have a very regulatory industry. I think employers on the call will certainly adhere to that, without a doubt. But I think the first thing to understand for employers, is that an apprenticeship is actually a job. Some people get confused and think it's a bit of a qualification sometimes, but it's actually a job as an apprenticeship and it's a tripartite agreement with the employer, the provider and the apprentice. And each one of those plays a key role in the success of the apprentice as well. But in terms of the regulations that are there for employers. First and foremost, you know, the thing that an apprentice would need is support and full support from the employer. That's very, very important. And what that really means is, or what an element of that would be, is off the job time. So an apprentice requires off the job time to be able to carry out their studies that will support them to generate and gain the skills within the workplace. So it's important that the employer does support that individual in giving them, you know, whatever the planned hours or whatever time that is during the week that they require to carry out their studies. Apprentices have the same rights as any other employee in the organisation, so there's no differences there in terms of their employee rights and such forth. They're paid the same, they're paid apprenticeship minimum wage that should that exist. I think the other thing to understand is we've got, colleagues from social work here, there's other regulatory requirements that are required as well. So for example, Social Work England have requirements in addition to the apprenticeship requirement. But fundamentally there are lots of regulations around apprenticeships. Probably more than any other type of qualification that a student may do. But the key thing is in supporting that apprentice, making sure they've got time to do their study so they could successfully be of benefit to your organisation.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you very much. So over to Hazel now, Hazel or Claire. Obviously you're a rural employer and we're talking about sort of distance learning. So why were distance learning elements so crucial in choosing a supplier?

Hazel Ostle

For us, Durham is quite a large county, and like you said, we are quite rural. So what happens with us is that we have, conurbations where people live, and then we have large areas of the county where there aren't very many people living. So what this means is that is that we've set up our services to accommodate that, so we will have teams where larger quantities of people live. So that means our teams are spread across the county so they are geographically distant. So it could take you an hour to get from our most distant offices to each other. And so distance learning does reduce the travel that we require of our apprentices. But the other benefit that distance learning has brought to us really, is that because The Open University plans so much around learning, it's really clear to our apprentices what they need to do every week. So there's a lot less room for them to drop behind because they fail to plan, somebody else fails to plan, there's bad communication, that kind of stuff. It's out there, it's really clear to people what they need to do. And we have planned our scheme so that they are released regularly on the same day each week, so they know when they're going to have that safe time to study.

Jagdeep Soor

Sounds great, thank you. Over to Louise now, just in terms of sharing your experiences at the Co-op and highlighting the right programmes for your organisation, can you sort of share your experiences?

Louise Timperley - Apprenticeship Manager at the Co-op

Yes I can Jagdeep. There's a wide variety of programmes at Co-op. We've been working with apprenticeships for many years now, even before the apprenticeship levy started in 2017. And over that period of time we developed our apprenticeship provision to support the business. We've been very clear throughout the development process that it has benefits to the business, as well as benefits to the individual that are really important to us. And so when we looked at different programmes, you'll be aware that we've got lots of our colleagues working across our stores. And so we develop programmes that are retail apprenticeships from Retailer at level two right the way to Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship up at level six for our retail colleagues. But a number of our programmes are for low volume learners, so colleagues who work in our support centre across areas like finance or digital or HR. And those are the programmes that although the numbers are small, we take great pride in the fact that we've got a lot of different programmes that are complex and used for upskill purposes and progression, or for new colleagues entering our business.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you and just staying with you, Louise. So why is it important to get buy in from stakeholders internally for apprenticeships?

Louise Timperley

Yes, I mean it's critical. If you haven't got buy in from the line managers of the apprentices, the apprenticeship will fail and the apprentices will not succeed. That's the most important piece of advice. I know that later on in the webinar we'll be talking about that, about how to embed apprenticeships, but if you've not got the line manager on board, then it really isn't a recipe for success. And there's lots of resources that training providers like The Open University will provide to support those line managers if it's very new to them, but they're not scared of the of the process or concerned about the learning period.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you very much. Hazel, Claire, do you have anything to add to that in terms of stakeholder input, how critical they are?

Hazel Ostle

For us, I think we have been really, lucky to have had really high level buy in. So we have buy in at, not just manager level, but at our most senior management levels who have supported our apprenticeship throughout. So there's been a huge organisational commitment, which has been around the importance of bringing these social workers into the organisations. That's been really helpful throughout.

Jagdeep Soor

Great, thank you very much. It sounds like you're doing some fabulous work there. And Mark just coming to you. Why do you think leaders and managers need to be brought on board early on in an apprenticeship?

Mark Cameron

I think this is pretty critical to the overall process. So the reality is you don't just decide to do an apprenticeship, it's got to be part of an overall plan. And one of the things we do observe in The 5% Club is workforce planning, and the back to basics view of what's required for new skill, reskill and upskill as we move into the information age, is a bit of a blind spot for many employers. So you don't just say, we've got a workforce of 3,000, let's have 50 apprentices. Where do those apprentices fit in? And it's important that people look at it through the perspective of new skills, i.e. those who are transitioning from education into work for the first time. But increasingly, from now until 2035, the reskill and upskill agenda as the nature and future of work changes. So there's a macro view for leaders. And that's from the board down. And it's important that the HR function and the L&D function has a place at the board. And then more tactically it's important to be able to describe to an apprentice, particularly those from Gen Z, what they get from the world of work and what the pathway for their career is. Those pathways need to be described in two ways. There's a classic pathway, a linear pathway. You start your journey at this level and you progress. But also as we become more familiar with skills in the workplace, for people to understand the skills they have and how they can zigzag their way through a progression pathway. And unless managers and leaders are au fait with the overall plan, the apprentices skills and their development needs and how they're going to navigate through the world of work, the reality is the apprentice will look for an for an employer elsewhere that can provide them with that surety. And therefore, it's critical for leaders to take that strategic view all the way down to the tactical view. And we are doing some brilliant work with The Open University, with an academy approach that will help employers with the the latter aspect, which is pastoral care. And the final point I would make is there's so many accidental managers out there who are put in charge of an apprentice or a graduate without actually much thought being given to the skills they need to do that. And therefore, it's critical that the employers look at that and ensure they invest in their workforce to give them those skills and recognise that will take time. So it's a multifaceted approach and I know that it was a simple question Jagdeep, but I hope I've answered that.

Jagdeep Soor

You have, extremely well. Thank you Mark, and I'd just like to stay with you as well really. So we want to discuss the challenges and solutions to finding the right candidates to become apprentice and getting them on board the

programme, so the apprenticeship programme. So Mark, do you feel there are still misconceptions about apprenticeships and who they are suitable for?

Mark Cameron

Yes. There's a lot of misconceptions, not helped by some of the research that's been published in recent weeks. So Learning and Work Institute, for instance, have just published a piece of work that says, there's a lot of graduates doing apprenticeships. And therefore there's a perspective that graduates are stealing places that others would use. Well, we need to remind people that graduates are former apprentices. There is a thing as a degree apprentice and there's a pathway. And if we start to challenge the end of the pathway at master's level, then we then we remove the pathway and encourage people to reconsider the university route. So that the current narrative doesn't help. I think the other aspect as well, is the barriers to an apprenticeship. As someone has pointed out to me recently, in order to graduate from university, there's no test of functional skills. So in your graduation ceremony, no one worries if you've got level three maths, english or you've got digital skills. And yet for an apprenticeship, it's a critical part of completion. Therefore what you find is because employers are not education leads. Employers will mitigate their risk in terms of completion by insisting that people have those functional skills at the start of the apprenticeship, not at the end. And that creates a barrier. And I think what we found, from our employer audit process is there's a general demise still, and this mirrors a national debate, in the level two apprenticeship. So over the last three years we've seen a gradual decline. We're seeing the increase in the level four to seven, so the degree and master's apprenticeships, and a static level at level three. But we've got to ensure that apprentices are open for all. And the other thing is, which I'll refer back to my previous answer. In the future, people will not be going through the traditional approach. Leave school, go and get sheep dipped in a skill which will last you for 50 years. What we need people to do is go, yes, you might transition to work through an apprenticeship or a graduate scheme, but across your 50 or 60 plus years of economic activity, you will need to reskill and upskill a significant amount. And therefore, we need to challenge the notion that apprenticeships are just for early careers. They're for everybody. And actually employers are starting to wake up to the fact that the reskilling and upskilling agenda will demand people to start to consider using the apprenticeships as part of that overall pathway, or indeed as new challenges and new roles start to feature in the workplace.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you Mark, and that leads me really nicely, great segway to the next question and that's across to Craig. There is a perception that apprenticeships are often only for younger people, but that always isn't the case. So how is that reflected in cohorts of The Open University learners?

Craig Jackson

Yes, thanks Jagdeep. I think the first thing to say for The Open University is that the average age of our apprentices is 34. To follow on from what Mark was saying about, you know, second careers and such fourth, and further upskilling as they go through their economic journey. A lot of our apprentices join us are in their second career. So for example, we've got a lot of nursing students, a lot of social work students who have gone into that career later down the line, and they need upskilling and they need to have the correct skills for that. We do find a lot of our of our apprentices are in their late 20s and 30s, and even 40s at the university. So our average age is 34. We're open, as our name suggests in terms of The Open University. We welcome apprentices of all ages, whether they're school leavers or whether they're, you know, in their 40s and reskilling into a new career.

Jagdeep Soor

Wonderful, thank you Craig. I'd just like to sort of touch upon the work we do, at the Pathway Group. And our work around trying to get more marginalised communities and individuals, from those cohorts into apprenticeships. We run a number of initiatives and events. We have our Multicultural Apprenticeship Awards, which is a fabulous celebration of diversity and inclusivity in apprenticeships. and then we have a Multicultural Apprenticeship and Skills Alliance, which we work with about 45 to 50 organisations, like minded organisations that are really driven to get more marginalised communities and individuals from those communities into apprenticeships. What traditionally happens is they follow sort of the linear route, as Mark alluded to in terms of FE and HE for further education, higher education. And that's a lot to do with sort of the knowledge and the education around what apprenticeships are. And that's what we're effectively looking to do at the Multicultural Apprenticeship and Skills Alliance with the supports of our patrons. So The Open University are a patron of the Multicultural Apprenticeship and Skills Alliance, as is the Co-op, and The 5% Club are strategic partners. It really helps support that. What we're trying to do is educate, engage and elevate through advocacy and policy. So use data, use evidence, use test and learn pilots that are evaluated to really change the dial on that and get more marginalised communities and individuals from those communities into apprenticeships. I really wanted to touch base in terms of what we're doing as an alliance. Going over to Louise now.

In terms of the strategy, you find, to find your candidates that your organisations. Can you sort of talk about what's been successful?

Louise Timperley

I'd just like to follow on from what you've said there, Jagdeep, about, diversity and inclusion and social mobility. One of the programmes that we've run is our Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship Programme, which I referred to earlier, and that's been for many of our store colleagues who, to use your term Mark, have been accidental managers, not been formally trained in it. And actually, by joining that programme and learning how to be managers in the truest sense, it's really helped their career development. So some of our colleagues who are those apprentices were unable to access higher education university pathways when they were 18. They have really seen the fact that the Co-op has supported that journey through their apprenticeship and has helped their career progression now at a much later stage in their career or in their life, when they are committed to Co-op as a result of the investment in them. That's one example of an upskill programme, and another example, is the work we've done in our depots, where you'll be very familiar with the HGV driver shortage that nearly brought the country to a standstill a couple of years ago, and we were using our Driver Apprenticeship programme to bring new colleagues into our business to support the growing numbers and to try and change the age demographic of our driving population. So we used upskill internally as well as new recruits. And actually we were able to progress the careers of some of our depot workers, warehouse staff who wanted a different career and were able to start on a new salary trajectory, because our drivers are paid more than our warehouse staff in general, and that was an option that was open to them, and again helped to drive social mobility within our organisation. That's just a couple of examples of what we've done, and I'll talk a little bit later about some of the work that we do external to the Co-op to drive social mobility across our communities as well as internally within our business.

Jagdeep Soor

Across to you as well now Claire, just going back to that question in terms of strategy to find candidates for your organisation particularly, you spoke about, quite a rural type organisation. What's been successful in terms of how you find your candidates for your apprenticeship programmes?

Claire Brown

I think when we were looking at developing an apprenticeship programme, obviously, as people may be aware, there is, in children's social work nationally, there is significant recruitment and retention challenges, and they're often not enough sufficient qualified practitioners to fill roles. and obviously within sort of frontline services, in child protection, you often find that a lot of practitioners, once qualified, may work in that role for five years and then move on. And I think the opportunity to do the apprenticeship was that it gave us an opportunity to sort of grow our own, rather than necessarily rely solely on graduates from other sort of traditional HE, higher education routes or programmes. And in regards to our apprenticeship programme, we not only promoted that within our organisation as a statutory agency, but also to the wider community. So we opened it up to other people from, who live in other authorities or in other walks of life. I think that's been very, useful for people because, as I say, it's made it accessible to people of all ages because it's recognised that you spoke earlier about the average age of a potential apprenticeship. For a lot of people to go towards a traditional university route, that just presents challenges, obviously you invariably have to step away from employment but also come with other financial commitments and not everybody is in a position to do that. So that's why for our apprenticeship group, we were able to offer people the opportunity to study, but also to be employed in a role as well while they do that. Which for a lot of people is obviously very attractive. And I think that in regards to promoting it, I think across the organisation and wider, and what we've found to be very useful is prior, we have regular online briefings between ourselves and the OU that interested candidates can apply, can access. And that's very, very useful because I think it gives the apprentices a greater understanding of what the programme is from the OU point of view, but also the offer from ourselves as an employer. And I think it gives them a chance to ask questions. We also involve existing apprentices as well, to talk about their apprenticeship experiences in the session. And I think that's very useful because when people are thinking about it or making the next step to apply, they've got a really good understanding of what the programme is and whether it's right for them.

Jagdeep Soor

That's some fabulous examples of really comprehensive. Thank you very much. Craig, over to you from a provider point of view, what does an employer need to do to successfully onboard apprenticeships? Which is really, really important.

Craig Jackson

There's many things that we need to look at here, really. I think the first thing is work with the providers as early as possible to identify any skills gaps that you have and what potential apprenticeships might need those skills gaps and all those needs. and then it's kind of moving on to finding suitable applicants within your area who need to, you know, who are potential apprentices and then whether they can be funded as well, whether that be through the levy, or not through the levy as well. But the key rhetoric that keeps going through these conversations, and this is why managers and it's really ensuring that the line manager is supportive of that apprentice. You know, at the very beginning I spoke about the importance of the tripartite arrangement here, and it's really important that the apprentice themselves are supported not only by the provider but by the line manager. And as soon as the line manager understands what an apprenticeship is, and the line manager understands what the support they need to give to the apprentice, it will be a success. So, you know, everybody does feel that the apprentice is at the heart of this. And yes, they are, but they can gather so much support from the line manager in their workplace because that's the person they will probably see the most. In all honesty, rather than the actual training provider potentially. So it's really important. And at The Open University, what we try and do is we do briefings for line managers. So they so they understand what their role will be, how they can support that apprentice. And then it's really about communication, staying in communication, contact communications throughout. We try and do that as best as we possibly can and have as much communication with different forms throughout that apprentices journey. So and with, with the employer, we have a team of what we call Apprenticeship Programme Delivery Managers, and their role is to support the employer and the apprentice, primarily the employer. And it's so important to ensure that that employer feels supported. That employer knows what the journey that this apprentice is on so that they can support that person on that apprenticeship. So, there's a lot of things that go on to onboarding, but what I would say is the key thing is, the line manager support in terms of this.

Jagdeep Soor

Absolutely and Craig, can I just stay with you as well because we want to discuss setting the right conditions to learn on the job. So where do you perceive the challenges emerge during programmes for learners or employers?

Craig Jackson

Yes, there's always challenges. You can't get away from challenges, unfortunately, and these come in many different forms. For example, an apprentice could change role, they could change their job, they could get a promotion throughout their apprenticeship. And depending on what apprenticeship they're on, if they're on a three or four year degree apprenticeship, then there's potential, what happens in that time, both in terms of life and, and their employment so they could change their role. And you've got to still ensure that they can continue with their apprenticeship if they were within the same organisation, if they're not within the organisation, they move on to a different organisation, which they can do. Then it's obviously if that employer is supportive as well, then it's supporting them in their new role to make sure they're getting the experiences to develop those skills in the workplace. But there's sometimes circumstances that, you know, might facilitate what we call a break in learning, whereby for some reason, they can't continue with their apprenticeship. And we support them through that break in learning where they may take six months, three months or a year, potentially in some cases, and it's really important that we support that individual through that. There can be challenges for both the employer and for the apprentice. So it's important that that support is there for them. And then I think sometimes, when you're studying and you've got, a full time job as well, even though you're getting your study time, it's a lot on there's a lot to do. Sometimes apprentices do feel overwhelmed, but making sure that, you know, you support that apprentice in both from a work aspect to reduce their workload, if that's necessary. Also from a provider's point of view to making sure that they feel that they can achieve and be a success in what they're doing.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you Craig, and Mark over to you really, because I know that there's certain challenges that SMEs small medium enterprises face when it comes to supporting apprenticeships and apprentices. So what can be done so they get the experience that they need, a positive experience?

Mark Cameron

I think the question is around the sort of challenges faced by SMEs, but I would start by saying that I think SMEs are a very safe home for apprentices, and a lot of SMEs have got apprentices and apprenticeships running through their DNA. And in terms of less formal pastoral care because of the fact the organisation is smaller and everyone tends to know each other. Actually that tends to work really well. Where SMEs struggle though probably two or three fold, I think. Firstly, developing an overall plan, if you've got a workforce of 100, you've only got a limited space to accommodate, apprentices and other workplace learning. So having a plan and making an informed choice as

to whether it's a graduate you employ, whether you have a T level placement, whether you're running a work experience programme, an internship or an apprenticeship is quite an important facet. But as I started, I think most SMEs are very good at planning for apprenticeships and actually what we see is encouraging SMEs to take on graduates and graduate trainees is part of the challenge. I think the other thing for an SME though, is who is it that's going to deliver the training and, is there a competitive market to allow an SME to participate? And we hear a lot of frustrations from our SME members around, yes, we'd love to run an apprenticeship, but we're relying on the local further education college and they can't provide the apprenticeship. Or there's a one or two year wait for that apprenticeship, so that stifles their ability. But of course, as we know and you'll know from the Pathway Group, Jagdeep 70% of apprenticeships are provided by independent training providers and the cost of running an apprenticeship in an SME is 10% or 20% higher than it is in a large company. So actually many training providers choose not to engage in the SME market. So the SME will be driven to provide an apprenticeship, but won't be able to provide or find a provider. And what we're seeing in a number of our members is actually, they bite the bullet and they develop their own academies and they deliver apprenticeships themselves and become an employer provider. And they're very successful, and we're starting to see a behaviour where SMEs who are struggling in that space start to collaborate together to create that approach. And that's beyond the sort of agency approach to, some apprenticeships. Then I think the final thing and I will labour this point because it's becoming quite critical, is having the pathway to progression. And that's where an SME will struggle. So what we find is a number of SMEs say, well, I won't participate in apprenticeships because when the apprentice completes their apprenticeship and they've been with me for two or three years, they leave me and go to a large employer and they, go and get a skilled hire. But that's a function not just of the attractiveness of the roles in large employers and the current skills crisis, but the fact that many SMEs don't articulate the pathway. So the apprentice doesn't know where they'll progress to next. And therefore having those pathways or indeed saying to an apprentice, you know, the pathway might be you leave us but come back. But being able to articulate that it is critical.

Jagdeep Soor

That does Mark, and thank you for highlighting some of the issues and the nuances etc. and good luck with your lobbying. There is a lot to do. And SMEs are really critical to apprenticeship programmes and provision. So I really want to talk about handling things such as off the job training and placements to widen the experience of an apprenticeship and apprentices within your various organisations. So Louise, can I come across to you and say, how do you handle things like off the job training and placements?

Louise Timperley

It can be quite difficult in an organisation like ours, where we've got a lot of the front of house colleagues who are working in our stores, so some of our smaller stores, we actually struggle because we need to have at least two people on the shop floor at any one time. And if one of our apprentices is doing their off the job training, then we have to do what's called backfill and put somebody else in the store. So although the apprenticeship levy covers the cost of training for us, it doesn't cover the cost of backfill. So we have to set our own budget for apprentices in our stores. But that's really important to us because we want to develop the skills of our colleagues who are connecting with our communities, our customers, and our members on a daily basis. And we don't want them to miss out just because we've got the off the job training considerations and the cost of those. It's more easy to navigate through with our colleagues who are working in our support centre. A bit like what Mark described working within the SMEs. If each of our departments is viewed as an SME, where colleagues know each other very well and can actually work around each other and support each other to get that off the job training time, then that's how it works best for us. And so it's constantly a challenge for us, but it's one challenge that we want to face head on because we know how important it is. Without the off the job training, our apprentices are not going to get through their programme successfully, and they're not going to be able to develop their careers and increase productivity for Co-op.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you and over to you, Claire and Hazel. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Claire Brown

I mean, I think Hazel mentioned it earlier. What we do, we within our programme, we provide one day a week off the job learning, and that's set at the start of the year, of the programme. And it remains the same. And I think the advantage for apprentices is obviously this enables them to plan their academic commitments and also enables them to focus on specific areas of interest or learning. And if, for example, an apprentice has an area of interest or wishes to understand another area of practice or a service, we're able to facilitate sharing opportunities with services to enhance their knowledge. And I know, obviously, one of the aspects of off the job learning, we've also had some thought about the placements, because obviously we're in a slightly different to other people on this on the session

today, because we're a large organisation and we're in a position to provide a wide diversity of placements in both statutory, non-statutory and independent services. We have maintained, we have strong links with the charity and the independent sector as well in our locality. So we are really keen for apprentices to gain an understanding of the diversity of services that support the holistic needs of local communities.

Jagdeep Soor

That's wonderful, thank you. So some fabulous work being done there across both organisations, and obviously we want more apprentices to complete and we really want the percentages to go up. It's one of the real challenges isn't it with the programmes, in terms of how we facilitate success and completion of the apprenticeship programme. So Claire, if I can just stay with you, apprenticeships are challenging programmes and require the learner to balance study and work. So what can employers do if a learner is struggling?

Claire Brown

I think it's important. As I say, I think someone mentioned it earlier. I think it was Craig talking about that ongoing regular conversations with the apprentices and in the model that we have developed. Obviously, we have our apprentices who sit within hubs within the locality teams, and each hub is supported by a lead practitioner whose job is just to support the apprentice. So I think that if an apprentice is struggling, they can talk to their lead practitioner, or myself, or other people in the service, and we'll look at ways in which we can support them. So it might be that we offer additional study days, we reduce some of their work. We can also support the apprentice in planning their work. And we also I think it's really, good is that we liaise regularly with The Open University and the tutors as well to find, you know, work collectively to see how we can support the apprentice. But we do really encourage apprentices. We always say there's never a silly question and please, you know, don't struggle. You know, we're all here to help and what your experience might be similar to others. It's just that possibly, you haven't discussed it with others, but we're really encouraging our apprentices to contact us.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you very much. And Louise, over to you. Is there anything specific that you do at the Co-op to support a learner?

Louise Timperley

Yes, I think I would just add to what's already been said in relation to how the providers work with us. So I think I mentioned before, we've got 35-40 different training providers on across all our programmes. And within those training providers, it's really critical that the programme coaches know the learners that they're working with. So we know that where the ratio of programme coach to learner is lower, then those programme coaches have greater knowledge. So in some instances we'll have a situation where a learner is actually struggling or doesn't want to say that they're struggling, feel that it's, you know, it's their fault maybe. Or don't want to blame anybody else. And so in those cases, the programme coach will come to us and will talk to us about concerns. And again, that tripartite agreement that Craig mentioned comes into play, where the provider and the line manager and the apprentice have an honest conversation and support packages are put in place. Whether it be additional support from the training provider or additional support from the workplace because everybody wants that apprentice to succeed.

So Craig, what role should a responsible provider play and what options are there to help?

Craig Jackson

There's many things a provider can support an apprentice and an employer with. The first, and most important part is to have constant communication, constant contact with both parties. So both the employer and the apprentice. So The Open University, what we have is, we run what we call regular tripartite progress review meetings that updates both the apprentice and the employer, where they are in terms of their journey and whether they're they're on track or whether they're behind. And those happen four times a year. But in addition to that, we have regular informal catch ups. So if the apprentice wants that, the employer request that as well. But we also send reports to the apprenticeship lead of that organisation, sometimes every month, depending on the type of employer, but definitely every quarter. And we meet with the apprenticeship lead regularly as well. So it's really about contact. But should a student fall behind or should an apprentice fall behind, then we do have intervention strategies to get that apprentice back on track. Make sure the employer is supporting them in the workplace as well. To ultimately ensure the success of both the apprentice and the employer.

Jagdeep Soor

We'll move across to you, Mark, then if I may. So does attention need to be paid to learners from certain demographics, such as care leavers, who might suffer from awarding gaps and be more likely to need specific and more in-depth support?

Mark Cameron

Yes, so I mentioned earlier our employer audit, and last year we audited 230 of our members. So we've got a membership of 1,100, they've got nearly 2 million employees collectively. The 230 employees went through the audit last year, have a workforce of about 850,000, and they had nearly 70,000 workplace learners, so 50 to 55,000 apprentices on their books. The challenge we faced when we asked questions about protected characteristics, what you find is most organisations can tell you age and gender of the learner. About 50% of those we audited were able to talk about ethnicity. But beyond that there was very little information. So what we're finding is boards of organisations, or MD's are driving to diversify the workforce without thinking about inclusion. And actually inclusion should lead diversity not follow. Because if you have a diverse workforce but you're not inclusive, the employee won't stay. And in a learning space, if you don't understand the protected characteristics and background of an individual, how can you tailor a learning program to them? So the point about care leavers is important, but there's a whole bunch of different, segments of the workforce that need to be thought through. And we would advocate for a segmented approach because, you know, parental responsibilities bring with them challenges, for the people in the latter stages of their career. There's another aspect of caring responsibilities, you know, certain genders go through, different stages of life and being aware of the menopause and the impact that can have on a learner is important. So what we'd advocate is for employers to take HR data and to then think about how they use that to create inclusive learning programmes. There are some really smart activities out there. I was at an event with Microsoft late last year, Microsoft are using AI to enable blind workers to participate fully in the workplace. So, understanding disability and now understanding how some of the technological advances can help people participate is key. And of course, that's part of the government's mission, moving from 75% to 80% employment. That's another 2 million people back in the workplace. That's not just about the Neet population that we hear a lot about. That's about returners from care, and people who've taken breaks to for parental support and indeed the over 50s. So what we've got to do is take this segmented approach and then put in place mechanisms that support that.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you Mark and I totally agree. You know, there are a whole cohort and community of individuals out there who could really benefit from apprenticeships. And I think you mentioned a number of those, you know, 50 plus, the economically inactive, the returners to work, etc. that we really should be looking at as well. Thank you very much. So within your specific organisation, how important is mentoring and coaching? And what role do they really play within your organisation?

Louise Timperley

It's really important across Co-op, and we've got formal and informal coaching and mentoring. And in fact we've just done a really successful programme using the level five Coaching Professional Apprenticeship standard, where a number of our colleagues decided that they wanted more support to be formal coaches and mentors, and that programme has been really successful. Those now qualified coaches are advertising their services across our business internally. So if colleagues want to have a coach to support them throughout their career progression, then they can use our website to actually identify a coach that whether there's a sort of a dating profile, if you like, where a coach talks about their career and a coachee talks about what they want from a coach, and the two are matched together. And that's been really, really successful. And I think it's really important that, there are formal mechanisms for coaching and that people recognise that there is a way of doing it and a way of not doing it. And I think we're all guilty of giving advice, but not always coaching. And so the coaching learning, particularly using the apprenticeship programme has been particularly successful for us. I actually think things like coaching and mentoring are sort of inherent in social work. And the model when you think about reflective supervision and group supervision. But I think in regards for our apprentices, obviously, as I mentioned earlier, they have the support of a lead practitioner who can provide sort of mentoring and coaching. Also within the organisation, we have a coaching network, we have provided coaching conversations. So it may not necessarily, it might be a practitioner or someone from a different area of service that, similar to yourself Louise, we can link in to the apprenticeship. If it's thought that they're more supportive, or the apprentice has a really good relationship.

Jagdeep Soor

I really want to touch on the advocacy and growth of apprenticeships, and how important it is to highlight success, so across to you Mark. So why do you think it is important for employers to share success internally and externally on their apprenticeship programmes and their apprentices?

Mark Cameron

So it's very simple, it's all about employer branding. I know the nature of the skills and employment marketplace has changed slightly this year and it's, there's a bit of a downward trend. But what we've seen of late, when there's high competition for talent, then employer branding is incredibly important. And what I mean by that is externally having a brand that, as an employer that people relate to. So people want to take pride in where they work, but they also want to work for organisations that have got fantastic credentials and outwardly show what they do to improve the lives of their workers. So that makes you a destination of choice. So when there is a tight employment marketplace, talking overtly about what you do and how you use apprenticeships. For the new skill, so the transition to work, but as I said earlier, that upskill and reskill agenda is going to be critical. Especially as 70% of jobs are likely to change significantly in the next 5 to 10 years, so there's a lot of uncertainty. There was a big paper published back in early January around the future of AI and how it's going to be essential in the UK. That actually, for a lot of people is quite a daunting proposition. And they'll want to go to an employer that will help them navigate what AI and automation means. So that's the outward thing. Internally, again as I mentioned earlier, employer branding helps retention. It's about employee engagement. Employee engagement isn't just about surveying the workforce and boasting about high levels of completions of those surveys. It's about having a workforce that's engaged and, in a session hosted by the OU, when we've talked long and hard over a number of years now about learning as a benefit. Learning is a benefit and engaged workforce, a learning workforce, will aid retention. So your employees won't look elsewhere to pursue their pathway, they'll stay with you. So it's all about employer branding. It's about attracting people into your business. And it's about retaining the top talent in your business and using apprenticeships and other workplace learning to champion the cause.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you. Wholeheartedly agree as well with you Mark. Across to Louise now, so in terms of apprenticeships across communities, how do we advocate apprenticeships and share stories outside of the business?

Louise Timperley

What we try and do is work with other employers and collaborate, so we set up something called Co-op Levy Share. We set it up nearly four years ago now, and we've supported over 3,000 apprenticeships across across the land. And I think touching on what you were talking about Mark, which is the the changes that we've seen in the employment landscape and the changes that are coming through with the Growth and Skills Levy, replacing the Apprenticeship Levy. We're just wanting to ensure that businesses are keeping an eye on their own levy and carrying on with business as usual, because any changes that are coming through are not going to come through very soon. It's going to take some time to develop. And each month, other organisations like ourselves will be seeing levy expiring and going back to HMRC, for HMRC to spend on apprenticeships, we hope. But what we are advocating is that you are more proactive with your apprenticeship levy. Have a look at what you've got spare that you could share. And if you want to find out more about it, get in touch with us at www.cooplevshare.co.uk and that's my plug.

Jagdeep Soor

Obviously you are patrons of the Multicultural Apprenticeship and Skills Alliance, which again enables you to offer your apprenticeship opportunities to wider communities as well. And again, thank you for supporting our work there. Across to you Claire, it's about building success for each new cohort, so how do you take actions from learnings?

Claire Brown

We're now in our second year of our apprenticeship programme. So we have recruited in the first year, and I mean, in the first year we had over 400 applications, which was a huge amount. We were really surprised by the level of interest and the applications, not only from local communities, but we had a lot of interest from nationally and also internationally. Because I think it was post-pandemic and I think a lot of applicants or people who expressed an interest, possibly thought there might have been a greater component of online virtual learning, but actually with it being a social work programme and obviously work experience as well, I think we had to have some of those conversations. I think that when we recruited the second time, I think we provided, well we learned that, I suppose, from that sort of recruitment information, and we were more specific in regards to the programme, the requirements, the location. Because again, as Hazel said, we're a large geographical county. I think we have a lot of neighbouring areas, so I think it was important that people understood some of the distances and the travel

requirements. I think that really that helped us because I think in the second year we got more focussed applications that were more specific, whereas I think we weren't shortlisting as many people out because I think people have taken time to sort of fully understand, what the opportunities were. And I think we also we meet regularly with our apprentices, our lead practitioners, practice educators and and other services to understand the impact of the programme and the support they provide to children and families. And I think that again, the feedback we received sort of informs our planning for future years. Or we might adapt things in recognition of some of the feedback we've received. So because, we want to ensure that we, as someone mentioned, you know, obviously when the apprenticeship starts with a three year programme, we recognise that their learning needs will increase and change as they go through those three years. So it's about us being flexible enough to respond to their needs and also adapt the opportunities, and for them to sort of enhance their development and progress.

Jagdeep Soor

Talking about data and how critical data is. So if I can come to you, around data and The Open University collecting data around success? And can you tell us what that is?

Craig Jackson

Yes. The Open University collects a great deal of data on its apprentices and on the programmes themselves. So we obviously collect normal, what we call qualification achievement rate data. And that tells us how our programmes are performing overall. But we collect data on individual students as well. And so you know, technically, are they improving their skills as they should be doing on an apprenticeship? What impacts are there for each and every apprentice themselves? So does it improve their job satisfaction by doing the apprenticeship? Have they been given a promotion? Have they been given a pay rise? But from the business point of view, we also look at the impact that's been had on the organisation. And for example, has it helped the organisation reach its goals and targets? Had the individuals taken extra responsibility because of their apprenticeship? And, you know, softer skills so can they work more independently? Has it created a greater positive team spirit? And what we do with that data, we analyse that data. We want to make sure that if we're not performing well in any one of those, then we look at our delivery and change our delivery to ensure that we get the best out of our programmes and our apprentices. So the impact is there for the employer.

Jagdeep Soor

So that draws us to the end, what an enthralling webinar that was. I mean, some some fabulous insights and takeaways. And thank you very much to all our panel, for providing so much critical information and expertise in apprenticeships. Just on sort of takeaway from me really, you know, in terms of apprenticeships being a tripartite agreement, and looking at the differences between sort of urban conurbation and rural area where apprenticeships can be delivered and the great work being done by Durham County Council in and around the rural activity and engaging with apprenticeships and apprentices. Some great insights again from Mark, really looking at what SMEs and how we should be supporting SMEs. You know, they're probably the largest population of employers across major cities. We're also looking at how the world of work has changed, looking at reskilling and upskilling rather than new skills. And, you know, there's not a job for life anymore. And looking at that transitional, sort of world of work now. Some really great examples of attraction, and particularly from sort of Louise and Claire in terms of how they attract apprenticeships. We looked at sort of data and how important data is and what we're trying to do with Multicultural Apprenticeship and Skills Alliance is really look at data and evidence to influence local, regional and national policy. And I think, the more organisations and individuals and stakeholders involved in apprenticeships provide that data and that critical data, the more we can move this agenda along and get even more individuals participating in apprenticeships going forward. Some fabulous work around the elements of mentoring. Louise mentioned here that the qualification for mentoring, for coaches and mentors, which was great. And looking at employer branding and how how important employer branding is. Which really brings me nicely to sort of my plug, which is we are hosting our second apprenticeship branding conference on the 3rd of April in Birmingham at Millennium Point, it's called Engage. It's being sponsored by UCAS and City & Guilds. We had a fabulous inaugural conference called Apprenticeship Branding Conference Amplify, and this is a follow up of that. But again, it's looking at how we can engage and introduce more individuals into the world of apprenticeships. So if anybody is interested in that please drop me a line and you can find out more. So really, I just want to go the panel individually, and if you've got something to plug, or if there is a great piece of advice that you want to provide employers with their apprenticeship journey, that would be really great? So Claire, can I come across to you please?

Yes, I think for everybody in the session today, I think we all recognise that our staff are our greatest resource. It's really important that employees invest in relationships with all staff. But I think potential apprentices from day one, sort of when they're interested or prior to application to really gain an understanding of their interest in the opportunity and hopes for their professional journey. I think having a person or a team for people to contact, to

discuss the programme is really important, because they're able to sort of share that information. In both our recruitment periods we had, as I as I mentioned earlier, two twilight online briefings for potential applicants to attend, and for both ourselves and the OU to discuss the programme and take questions, and I think feedback we had from our all our applicants is that they found that very, very useful. And also we involve our existing apprentices in our recruitment and our work, because I think they're able to provide a different perspective, you know, from what their experiences are and how the programme works and what it looks like.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you and over to you Mark.

Mark Cameron

I think, you know, it is National Apprenticeship Week, and my view in National Apprenticeship Week is apprenticeships are for 52 weeks of the year, not just this week. So what I would suggest to employers is, if you're not already, consider joining an employer movement or an organisation, or an institution to allow you to connect with other employers to share experiences, concerns, challenges, opportunities and get a dialogue going. It can be quite isolating if you try to do this alone. I would just suggest that you link up with other employers and, you know, organisations like The 5% Club are here to help you. We're free to join, we're a registered charity, so there's no cost. We're not out to make money out of you. But like I say, we might not be the right fit for you, but there's lots of other organisations.

Jagdeep Soor

Wonderful, thank you Mark. And Louise.

Louise Timperley

The top tip for me, I suppose, for apprenticeship programmes within organisations is about quality over numbers. So for us it's about right person, right programme, right time. And it's not a numbers game chasing the spend of the levy, or chasing the numbers of apprentices in the business. It's got to be right for the individual and it's got to be right for the business. And there's lots of resources around to support the organisations who want to develop their programmes, and I would encourage everybody to take advantage of those.

Jagdeep Soor

Thank you Louise, and Craig across to you.

Craig Jackson

My tip for the success of any apprenticeship programmes are to ensure that you are working closely with the apprentice, working closely with the employer. And the employer is also working closely with, and supporting their apprentice, and working closely with the provider as well. If that all comes together, you'll definitely have success with your apprentices and the added value it gives to your organisation as well.

Jagdeep Soor

Well, that just leaves me to thank our panel. Thank you so much for your fabulous insights and what really was enthralling for me, a bit of imposter syndrome for myself, but really enthralling webinar. Really great to hear from you experts on the panel. Really, it just leaves me to wish everybody a happy National Apprenticeship Week 2025. And please do remember that apprenticeships are for everyone. Thank you very much.