

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF ADVANCED PRACTITIONERS

In English Further Education



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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
Understanding the AP role	2
Responsibilities	3
Barriers and enablers	4
Capability	5
Perceptions	5
Tracking, monitoring and outcomes	6
Shared learning	7
Top tips for other providers	7
Conclusions	8



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to better understand how Further Education (FE) providers use advanced practitioner-type roles to improve teaching, learning and assessment (TLA). While advanced practitioners (APs) have been used in various guises across the FE and skills sector and anecdotal commentary describes these roles as being beneficial to the development of practitioners and useful in the improvement of TLA, there is limited current research or evaluation of these roles in practice.

This executive summary presents an overview of the results of in-depth case studies and a survey at 19 provider organisations. The research outlines the use and perceived impact of advanced practitioners to date, highlights effective practice, and provides practical illustrations and learning points for others seeking more effective ways to work with teachers, coaches, assessors and trainers to develop their practice.

Understanding the AP role

Across case study Further Education Institutions (FEIs), APs are commonly described as a peer-to-peer support structure where (mostly) active practising teachers or tutors provide advice and guidance focussed on improving teaching, learning and assessment. There are many alternative job titles for AP roles, including Quality Practitioner, Learning Improvement Facilitator, Professional Tutor, and Teaching Skills Coach. Typically, APs help teaching staff to trial new TLA strategies, share good practice and support wider development, such as staff inductions and strategic planning.

To be effective, APs should be trustworthy and available to all staff, regardless of whether they are high-performing, have real challenges in their practice, or just want a 'lift'. Fuller access normalises AP support and reduces any stigma associated with the role, in short, good practice means using APs for '*both prevention and cure*'.

It is important that APs work '*alongside not above*', and encourage staff to take ownership of their own development, rather than telling them what to do and how to do it. Effective APs operate like '*scaffolding*' to



[An AP is] somebody who is pretty much consistently an outstanding teacher, and additionally has the desire, the skills perhaps, and the temperament to coach and mentor other people... you can be an outstanding practitioner, but you don't necessarily have the skills to support other people... Somebody who is a regular practitioner... genuine passion for teaching as a vocation and a real enthusiasm in terms of what you're trying to do.

SENIOR MANAGER



help staff to reach their full potential.

APs are most successful when there is a clear vision for the post linked to a detailed job specification and selection process. Without a common vision, careful planning and explicit boundaries, there can be conflicting views about APs' purpose, leading to tension between stakeholders and the risk of 'role creep'. Effective APs are confident and excel in teaching practice, they have the ability to coach and mentor others, they have excellent interpersonal and communication skills and they have an understanding of change management, quality improvement and quality assurance.

Although there are a number of providers with subject specialist APs, cross-case analysis suggests that the 'generalist' model is most effective, particularly in the long-term. APs are able to demonstrate that their guidance is applicable in a range of learning environments and bringing in an AP from outside of the curriculum can foster opportunities for interdisciplinary innovations and synergy. The dominant view is that active teaching is essential. APs need to retain first-hand experience of the sector, and this lends much-needed credibility to the role.

The formal benefits associated with taking on an AP role are typically some level of timetable remittance, career progression and (for most providers) some level of salary uplift. Timetable remittance is often described as the most important element to physically be able to do the role and the level of remittance varies between two hours per week to 0.5 full-time equivalent, depending on caseload size (e.g. the number of teaching staff) and travel time (e.g. visiting apprenticeship assessors); between 0.2 and 0.4 is most typical. However, the 'soft' benefits, i.e. job satisfaction from supporting and motivating other practitioners to excel and the potential for career advancement, are the biggest motivators to apply for an AP vacancy.

Responsibilities

APs typically target their support at all teaching staff to encourage a culture which values continuing professional development and to empower staff to be open and take ownership of their own development. To be effective, AP support should be offered to the broader staff population (not just those staff who have received 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' for a lesson observation). Generally, AP support and involvement in AP activities is viewed more positively because support is not associated with challenges in professional practice.

Support is themed in a number of ways: APs meet on a regular basis to discuss and identify TLA themes as they emerge across the provider, and Heads of Department and Senior Managers identify areas for improvement through performance management reviews and



It's really important that [seniority]'s not what that role is about, it's about everyone being in the same boat and I've just got the privilege of having a broader overview.

SENIOR MANAGER

I'm the captain of a very large ship and they are like a ferry boat that comes out to get you into the harbour... they are there to make sure, they know the waters and they will show you how to get through those waters to get where you need to be.

TUTOR

More than [teaching excellence] I'm looking for people who are passionate about, not only being excellent practitioners themselves, but passionate about supporting their colleagues to become enthusiastic, passionate and excellent practitioners.

SENIOR MANAGER

The benefits for a [AP] would be to show that they've made a difference, that they've supported members of staff, teachers, to show that they've encouraged and aided learning, that they've had that input into progress development, for both students and for teachers. And to be there as a guide and as a mentor to build a stronger working relationship.

TUTOR



walkthroughs.

Generally, support is delivered at both the group and individual level, and is practical, tailored and bespoke. APs have five distinct functions:

- Voluntary one-to-one support for the wider teaching workforce.
- Leading and facilitating group CPD programmes and sessions.
- Mandatory coaching and mentoring for staff experiencing challenges in their practice.
- Inductions of new staff.
- Support to meet strategic objectives set by the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted, senior management or Heads of Department.

Cross-case analysis suggests that developmental observations, which are firmly set apart from management structures, are a common and important individual support mechanism. Crucially, observations are not graded, are not linked to performance management and do not feed into the appraisal process. Additionally, one-to-one support from an AP on a more on-going or ad hoc basis is highly valued by teaching staff.

Barriers and enablers

FEIs identified a number of key barriers and enablers when introducing and developing the AP role.

Enablers include:

- Personalised and tailored support.
- Support that is available to every member of teaching staff regardless of their level of performance.
- A flexible, peer-to-peer support package which is non-judgemental, responsive, available and confidential.
- Ensuring APs have sufficient time, support and resources to do the role effectively.
- A clear vision of the role which is tightly specified in a detailed and carefully designed job description, and consistently communicated to staff.
- Senior management buy-in.
- APs retaining a number of teaching hours to ensure they maintain credibility with their peers and currency in teaching practice.

Barriers include:

- Personality clashes between tutors and Advanced Practitioners.
- Aligning the AP role with performance management, capability and formal observation structures.
- Hiring APs based on high teaching performance alone, rather than affability, coaching skills and interpersonal skills.
- Graded observations.

Capability

AP development is typically planned via existing structures available to all staff, i.e. annual appraisals and regular performance reviews. Generally, informal training is the largest component in-post AP development and there is a particularly strong emphasis on peer learning from other APs, senior management and from observing teaching staff, i.e. capitalising on the varied expertise and strengths of the whole institutional teaching workforce.

Typically, APs are able to access formal, accredited training linked to their personal objectives and the needs of the institution, which they are then responsible for cascading through the institution – curating good practice and putting it into practice. APs particularly value high-level qualifications focussed on coaching, mentoring and pedagogy. However, time pressures and limited financial resources to invest in external training limit the volume of formal and/or accredited development that APs can engage in. APs have a strong appetite to learn from other practitioners in the sector, for example, by visiting other providers and observing their practice, and a desire for more opportunities to network with individuals in similar roles in other institutions.

Perceptions

APs predominantly value the non-financial benefits of AP-type roles, particularly the personal satisfaction of developing others, over and above financial and career progression elements.

Senior Managers feel that APs have assisted them to improve TLA outcomes, have provided a valuable link between organisational strategy and front-line teaching staff, have made staff feel more supported, invested in, and valued by the provider, and have facilitated a positive shift in the culture and ethos of the organisation, with a move toward a more developmental and supportive model.

Across FEIs, the perceptions of tutors, senior managers and Advanced Practitioners are closely linked to the design and implementation decisions provider organisations make when introducing the AP role. These decisions can be broadly categorised under three types of model:



The deficit model

- Aims to improve the grade profile of the provider organisation. It is specifically focused on teachers that have received ‘requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’ in a formal lesson observation and emphasises the requirement to make improvements to professional practice. When AP-type roles are linked to performance management or are solely focused on those individuals who have not met college standards,



You constantly learn. Every day, you learn something new, and you have to be open to that. So, I go into people’s lessons and I see something, and I think, “Oh, my goodness me. Why am I not doing that?”

ADVANCED PRACTITIONER



It’s that indescribable feeling when you work with somebody and you see them progress. It’s not about the financial benefits for me.

ADVANCED PRACTITIONER



perceptions tend to be less positive or the role fails to have positive benefits.

The developmental model

- Aims to support and develop all staff through a mechanism of peer-to-peer coaching, developmental (non-judgemental) observations and professional discussions. Typically the coaching relationship is practitioner initiated, not linked to performance management processes, and not part of any mandatory support structures. When AP-type roles are linked to a developmental model, perceptions tend to be positive. Tutors in particular feel that the role has been introduced to develop and support staff.

The universal model

- Aims to support both those staff that require improvement to achieve the level of quality desired by the college, as well as support and develop all other teaching staff to move from good to outstanding through a mechanism of peer-to-peer coaching. In this model, the AP role is about support and enhancement rather than capability, which helps the role to be viewed as developmental rather than disciplinary. Perceptions are largely positive and the role is perceived to be supportive and valuable when it is made available to all staff. However some tensions are evident, which is not surprising given the model is still linked to mandatory support structures.

Tracking, monitoring and outcomes

The way that FEIs track, monitor and measure AP outcomes varies widely. Whilst some providers have comprehensive tracking and evaluation processes in place, others struggle to capture quantitative data and find it difficult to attribute change solely to the role of APs. In many cases, anecdotal or informal feedback often forms a large part of the evidence.

FEIs track and monitor a number of indicators including, but not limited to, staff retention, sickness/absence, time spent with an AP, graded observations, student attendance, predicted grades, punctuality, achievement, student satisfaction and Ofsted ratings. Feedback from students and staff is also used as a means of tracking, monitoring and measuring the effect of APs on TLA improvements.

Despite these difficulties, there is recognition that the use of AP-type roles leads to positive outcomes and changes across FEIs. Notable soft outcomes include improved tutor self-efficacy, confidence, engagement and motivation, and a change in organisational culture toward a more

supportive and developmental environment which emphasises the sharing of good practice.

When we asked survey respondents to indicate what difference they felt AP roles had made within their institutions, respondents who were not working in AP-type roles were most likely to agree/strongly agree that advanced practitioners had:

- supported the improvement of teaching, learning and assessment (83 per cent)
- made teaching staff feel more confident to try out new techniques, styles and approaches (75 per cent)
- made teaching staff feel more supported at work (69 per cent)
- given teaching staff more self-belief, confidence and self-esteem in their teaching practice (66 per cent)
- improved the organisational culture (e.g. focusing on teaching and learning, peer learning, sharing good practice, teachers feeling they're part of a community of practice) (66 per cent).

Additionally, when we asked survey respondents which factors they felt were the most important for maximising the positive impact of advanced practitioner-type roles, the top five most important factors were:

- Support that is developmental and non-judgemental.
- Activities that are organised at times and locations which are most convenient for staff.
- Teaching staff being able to raise problems and challenges confidentially with APs.
- Targets and goals for teaching staff being realistic and achievable.
- Approaches being based on evidence of 'what works' and best practice.

Shared learning

As part of the case study research we asked interviewees to share their thoughts about learning and tips they would pass on to other institutions considering the roll out of AP-type roles.



Top tips for other providers

- There were a number of activities interviewees felt were most effective: CPD sessions, coaching and mentoring, sharing good practice, and developmental (ungraded) observations.
- Interviewees highlighted the importance of APs being separate from management structures, and being managed by someone outside of the immediate management chain, e.g. the Quality Team. This strategy positions APs as a supportive mechanism and fosters a sense of trust and confidentiality.

- APs should maintain a number of teaching hours. This ensures they maintain credibility, currency in teaching practice, and it encourages a reciprocal relationship with teaching staff. However, APs should have dedicated time away from teaching to enable them to support as many colleagues as required.
- It is important to communicate the purpose and focus of the role clearly to ensure that APs are visible, staff know who they are, and feel comfortable to approach them.
- To be effective, APs must be supportive, approachable, '*able to work well with people and see the strength of people*' and happy to answer quick queries on a spur-of-the-moment basis, as well as spending longer in planned sessions with members of staff. The enthusiasm and passion that APs have for teaching and developing others is seen to be effective in motivating tutors and giving them the confidence to try new approaches and techniques in the classroom.
- Less effective practices include: allocating AP support to staff for a set length of time with little room for adjustment and operating reactively as a '*last resort*' for staff that require improvement.

Conclusions

This research suggests that APs could be a pivotal quality improvement mechanism for FEIs. Significant financial pressure and seismic restructuring of the sector has been widely discussed, and recent years have brought about many challenges and opportunities for FE providers. The evidence collected for this exploratory study indicates that the AP role is well placed to support institutions through this period of change. As the sector shifts towards having fewer, larger, more resilient and more efficient providers, APs can ensure that this change operates in a context of high-calibre TLA, practitioner-oriented interventions and a culture of continuous development.

The updating of the CIF signals that TLA improvement must have a greater central role in discussions across the sector. The general downturn in the proportion of colleges receiving Good or Outstanding inspections underlines a pressing need to refocus. Published evidence suggests that there are many pockets of low or no access to CPD in the sector, hampering FE staff's ability to improve and develop as practitioners. This is exacerbated by the nature of the workforce which, whilst benefitting from significant industry experience, does not have the same level of pedagogical training as other educational settings. This research suggests that APs could help to redress this balance by providing a cost-effective, focussed structure to facilitate and deliver valuable staff development. APs can provide a critical element of

knowledge-transfer which helps to upskill teaching staff and grow their capability to develop to meet the continually evolving demands of the sector.

Changing demands in provision also signal a growing need for AP input. The roles can be tactically deployed towards the myriad emergent needs of the sector, such as apprenticeships, new streamlined technical education routes and the increasing demand for maths and English spurred, in part, by raising the participation age (RPA). They can also be used in a highly responsive manner to answer common development needs as they emerge throughout the academic year. FEIs were therefore able to best use their AP workforce when they undertook periodic strategic reviews of the scope and priorities of the role, and adjusted it accordingly.

Other research consistently demonstrates that focussing on TLA improves results for learners. The findings detailed in this report add to the evidence base by providing strong qualitative evidence of the (perceived) benefits that APs have. The fact that senior managers were able to build a business case for APs which could withstand considerable budgetary scrutiny is testament to the significant influence of the role.