CASE STUDY:
HMP OAKWOOD (MILTON KEYNES COLLEGE)

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Background

HMP Oakwood is a privately-run Category C male Resettlement Prison in the West Midlands.

The Further Education (FE) contract is delivered by Milton Keynes College. Training is organised via five pathways, namely family, self-employment, creative, digital and vocational education. Due to a high proportion of inmates without Level 2 basic skills, provision at HMP Oakwood includes a substantive element of mandatory lower-level English, maths and ICT Functional Skills courses for those who need it. There are also a range of vocational qualifications including hospitality, construction, art and design, mentoring and bricklaying. FE qualifications delivered by Milton Keynes College are typically Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2, but a Level 3 business qualification was introduced in 2016-17 for vulnerable prisoners.

Learning, skills and work activities in the prison were assessed as 'requiring improvement' (3) by Ofsted in 2014.

Understanding the role of advanced practitioners

Advanced Practitioners (APs) at HMP Oakwood are first and foremost a support mechanism to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment (TLA). It is distinct from any management function, and a strong emphasis is placed on mentoring staff to help them gain new skills, hone the skills they already have, and give them a greater sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy in their own abilities. Staff have found that supportive and confidential coaching techniques are essential to create an environment where tutors feel comfortable to *'talk, share and probe'* openly.

APs also have a significant part to play strategically. They help to shape and implement new policy directions, and work hard to ensure that TLA-focussed organisational change is introduced and cascaded in a transparent and practitioner-oriented fashion. Having the expert input of an AP also ensures that new ways of working are 'streamlined' in such a way that they do not add to tutors' existing workloads. Support one tutor received to help them understand new responsibilities and meet strategic objectives led them to see their AP as *'my accountability buddy'*. They felt their AP helped to ensure they delivered quality work and met targets, but had manageable strategies to do so.

It's an invaluable support tool using a specialist… who's not part of the SMT structure.

Senior Manager

Having Advanced Practitioners guarantees there is a dedicated focus on teaching, learning and assessment. This dedicated focus - emphasising quality improvement and quality assurance – led senior managers to see APs at HMP Oakwood as a critical tool to set and maintain high expectations and standards.

> Advanced Practitioners have the time, managers have a hundred and one pulls on their time in every direction.

Head of Department

There are two full-time APs working across 10 prisons in the West Midlands to maintain geographical consistency across the provider. Each is seconded to a different institution as the need arises, but will check in with others on a less regular basis. The AP working with HMP Oakwood spends two days per week on site, supplemented by one day remote working to use technology which is unavailable on site. Both regional APs are generalists who support tutors working in both Functional Skills and all other areas of vocational education and training.

Activities

APs at HMP Oakwood deliver some group interventions as well as targeted one-to-one support. There are three routes to receiving one-to-one AP support at HMP Oakwood:

− Mandatory staff induction support including three probation observations.
− Referral via senior management following observation feedback which does not meet the required standard.
− Voluntary ad hoc or more formal self-referral.

To fit in with the structure of Offender Learning (i.e. continuous rolling cohorts, lengthy class sessions without breaks), support tends to be short, focussed and targeted on individuals and small teams rather than all FE staff simultaneously. Ten- or 20-minute bursts of discussion with an emphasis on practical 'takeaways' and strategies are often the most effective way of delivering support. Alongside these short conversations, APs will use a mix of developmental observations, feedback sessions, signposting and learning walks in their one-to-one support.

> Learning walks are really positive. Tutors want to hear back from [the AP], they're motivated to hear... they respond to it so well.

Senior Manager

Tutors found that putting an emphasis on practical, hands-on and kinaesthetic learning techniques is often most effective for this particular cohort. These techniques also help to work around prison regulations which restrict the use of ICT apart from the sanctioned virtual learning environment. In this context, APs help tutors to be *'very creative with basic resources'* rather than rely on the latest digital innovations to devise engaging lessons. This is particularly important in Functional Skills where the learners are often the most unwilling to engage due to prior unhappy educational experiences.

Some recent ideas which have worked particularly well include tearing up sheets of paper by certain proportions to visualise how much money learners could save on various car deals and using different interiors and DIY catalogues to plan redecorating a room at home. These tasks work on essential skills like measurement and budgeting but in an applied, hands-on fashion which better engages learners.

In addition, APs at HMP Oakwood have supported the introduction and roll-out of a number of institution-wide strategic interventions and priorities, including:

- A new Individual Learner Plan approach – the 'Blue Book' – which highlights overcoming barriers to learning, target setting, and student ownership of their own learning goals.

- 'Project-based' teaching where learners develop the skills to pass each module via a holistic project on an individual topic, rather than using worksheets and past papers.

    Using learner profiles and lesson plans to help tutors plan differentiated lessons according to behaviours, attitudes, styles, experiences and support needs.

- Constructing a tutor toolkit with a range of useful materials such as learning tips, charts, infographics and exemplar lesson plans.

- Improving tutor confidence in using the virtual campus and passing on this confidence to learners.

A key point emphasised through all activities is that it must be possible to put ideas into practice successfully with relative ease. In particular, by not adding substantive volumes of additional paperwork and administration to tutors' workloads. 'Simple tricks' and 'easy wins' that can be readily applied by tutors to improve their practice are very well-received by teaching staff.

> It's more about smart-working tips rather than needing to overhaul practice in a substantive way.
>
> **Tutor**

Capability

APs' personal objectives are decided via an annual appraisal which shapes the developmental activity they engage in over the following year. Broadly, there is always a focus on keeping abreast of what is happening in the FE sector and then adapting elements, styles, tools and approaches to be workable in an offender learning setting. For example, a recent external training course attended by the HMP Oakwood AP was around Cobbett and Strong's (2011) 'Talk for Writing' model of language acquisition i.e. how learners begin with learning new vocabulary for a new topic orally and then move to written language as their understanding deepens. The APs then look at how they can capitalise on this model in their own environments.

There is also cross-institution and cross-AP collaboration to share good practice in other regions and other providers. Co-working regionally in the West Midlands prisons additionally ensures that provision and quality is standardised across all 10 institutions.

Outcomes

When APs were introduced the college was focussed on improving standards and moving towards a Good Ofsted rating but felt that development of quality TLA needed another injection of energy. Staff feel that introducing APs has had a clear influence on moving provision in the right direction:

- Observation feedback and grades have hugely improved since the introduction of Aps.

- Results for basic skills are improving, sometimes significantly. For example, the latest Level 2 Functional Skills English cohort achieved 100 per cent and 90 per cent pass rates.

Staff, managers and the AP also feel that there are many 'softer' indicators of rising standards at HMP Oakwood, typically around changes in the learning environment and learners' attitudes.

Senior managers believe that the current efforts to embed individual learner plans have helped to

'turn learners around'. They feel that learners have greater ownership of their learning goals and are better able to articulate what they will learn and what difference it will make. Senior Managers expect that this will make learning more meaningful and improve learner engagement as a result.

Tutors suggested that the introduction of project-based work has improved students' engagement with course content and helped to shape them into proactive, independent learners. The previous model of individual worksheets could be stilted, so tutors found this new style of teaching sparked and built momentum throughout each project, helping learners to see and recognise their progression.

> Giving them their own project to explore, like setting up their own business, immediately makes them more focussed.
>
> **Tutor**

Teaching has become less didactic through the techniques that have been introduced. For example, introducing mini-whiteboards encourages learners to participate in classes; being part of the action and involved in the learning makes it harder for them to disengage.

> You can really see the difference in the classroom… the classroom was buzzing... it was so vibrant and the learners were so busy.
>
> **Advanced Practitioner**
>
> All the students are eager to correct and change their work... having made the mistakes themselves, they want to go back and reflect... it's very beneficial to teaching and learning.
>
> **Tutor**

The dedicated AP has also been working closely with tutors to help improve the learning environment (e.g. display boards). Classrooms are now more exciting and inspiring to be in, and tutors are better able to use the space around them as a useful visual aid to help learners engage with different ideas and reflect on their learning.

Shared learning

Top tips for other providers

- Effective Advanced Practitioners should use styles that are encouraging, non-challenging and non-threatening. Discussions must be collaborative and supportive without harsh judgement, otherwise tutors will disengage from the support and fail to be open and reflective about their practice.

- It is essential that Advanced Practitioners have prior experience as a practitioner as this helps foster greater trust and mutual respect amongst current teaching staff.

- Advanced Practitioners need to have enough time to dedicate to supporting others, attending external training or events, and conducting their own desk research. It is particularly critical

given the pace of change and innovation in the sector, and the continuous generation of new ideas.

− Advanced Practitioners are most effective when there is a strong and positive working relationship between Advanced Practitioners and senior managers, but it is important that tutors see and are convinced that Advanced Practitioners are not part of the management structure.