

# **Learning in the workplace – supporting football apprentices with the academic component of their apprenticeship**

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Thanks to the tutor/facilitators Helen Wood, Rich Pagano and Jean Bell, to Bruce Heil for help with evaluation and to Khadija Patel**

**18 August 2015**

## **1. Introduction and background**

The Open University in Scotland (OU) provided the academic component of the modern apprenticeship for football apprentices at Ross County Football Club from 2009/10 to 2014/15. This report is based on an in depth evaluation carried out at the end of the 2009/10 season and regular monitoring and evaluation of subsequent cohorts. It also contains a section on the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) in the 2014/15 season.

The Modern Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence, funded by Skills Development Scotland (SDS), requires young players to develop their academic skills alongside the main professional orientation of the apprenticeship. Football apprentices are typically contracted to a club for a two-year period. At the end of their apprenticeship only a minority of apprentices become full-time professionals. For those who are kept on careers can be relatively short. Part of the aim of the education component of the apprenticeship is therefore to provide alternative career options for those who may be looking for employment or further study at the age of 18 or 19, or who may wish to find an alternative career having spent a period of time as a professional footballer.

## **2. The workplace based model**

The norm for delivery of the educational component of the football apprenticeship is that students study modules at a local college or possibly study an additional qualification through a local school. Typically they are released for study on Wednesdays although sometimes this is affected by playing commitments and travel. In contrast the model used at Ross County was based on the apprentices working in a group setting in the training suite at the football ground in Dingwall. In principle apprentices are able to choose from the all the options available in the Open University's autumn module presentation.

Apprentices embark on their studies with a variety of previous experience and interests. Typically they are 16 or 17 years of age and in many cases they have tended to prioritise their interest and commitment to a football career over their previous academic studies. Thus for most the appropriate starting place in the OU curriculum is at access level, although modules from the OU's 'first year' curriculum are more appropriate for those who have good Highers or Advanced Highers. It's important to note that registration on an accredited OU module, at whatever level, brings with it a package of materials, structured support and a specialist tutor responsible for distance tuition and assessment of assignments.

In addition to the mainstream OU support model (supported open learning) the workplace model included the support of a facilitator who worked with the group in the training centre each Wednesday. The facilitators were all experienced OU tutors, but their role is not to teach the modules that the students have enrolled on. Indeed it's important that students have the freedom to choose different options and members of the group will typically be studying a range of subjects. Rather the facilitators role is to support the development of HE level learning skills, to provide a secure and supportive framework for a group of young students who are typically not confident learners and to maximize opportunities for peer support and a sense of collective commitment.

The facilitators were also involved at the beginning of each year, alongside specialist guidance staff, in supporting the group members to make educationally sound decisions about their choice of first module and then again at the start of year two of the apprenticeship.

In the first two years of the programme a single tutor was involved as facilitator. An additional two staff were contracted in year three and the group acted as a team to support the students since that time. At the start of the year the whole team meets with the students but for the rest of the year the team share responsibility and normally only one facilitator will be with the group.

On a typical Wednesday students will work individually on their chosen module but will also spend some time as a group on more generic skills.

In 2014/15 the option of studying accredited modules was unavailable for financial reasons and students were involved in working with the facilitators to develop a programme using non-accredited Open Educational Resources (OER). The strengths and weaknesses of this approach are considered in section 4 of this report.

### **3. The students and student outcomes**

Over the course of the programme there were considerable differences in the prior academic attainment of the students at the beginning of the apprenticeship. Numbers in the year cohort ranged from 5 to 9, which was sufficient to provide a sense of group identity. These numbers are on the low end of numbers that are the norm across Scottish professional football. Accredited higher education modules studied part-time incur student fees and because the facilitation costs are fixed whatever the group size, this presented funding challenges.

At the end of the first-year of the programme an in depth evaluation of the student experience was carried out. In subsequent years the facilitator team provided ongoing feedback and the first year feedback and experience remains typical.

The students are highly motivated to succeed in their professional careers and tend to downplay anything that is not football related. While this professional orientation shares some features with other vocational apprenticeships the fact that only a small minority are likely to progress to a full-time professional contract on completion of the apprenticeship is distinctive. Were it not mandatory the apprentices would rarely have chosen to engage with academic study. So for example one commented:

*Just like...trying to get motivated for it at the start...I didn't want to do it cos I just, like, wanted to be out playing football and that...*

The facilitator role proved critical in a number of ways. At the beginning students tend to be apprehensive and assume that study will be just like school. An early focus by the facilitator on study skills and working together as a group makes a difference. Many of the students in the first cohort commented

positively on how different the experience was from school. One had chosen a Mathematics module because he had had a negative experience of the subject at school.

*I just...wanted to see if I could get better at it ...to see if I can understand it more – be sharper...*

Another noted that:

*I think for me it's about a better understanding of the way how to work...like at school I just used to never concentrate, like to get a whole thing done but when I'm here I actually work for a few hours on a certain topic and get it done...so a better understanding on how to work.*

The facilitator for the 2009/10 cohort noted that:

*There were a vast range of starting points in the group of 9; some were perfectly competent and handled it well – but even these were happy to get the practice at writing; some who'd opted out at school a long time since – divided into the 'opted out and well capable' and the opted out and not so capable – but even the latter group came quite a long way.*

In general students needed support with skills. In reply to a question as to what was the most challenging aspect of study one identified:

*... just - like, extracting information from the books, like, putting it into words and then understanding the question they was asking us and, like, answering it specifically...*

While another commented:

*Some of the ways that they asked the questions... was quite hard...like... to put it down into words*

Encouraging group work is also a challenge. Students can associate working together in a group with a school-based perception of 'cheating'. But with facilitator support this perception can shift and one of the students in the first cohort recognised the value of this approach noting that

*It's good to have other people working with you as well rather than on your own.*

Over the course of the programme the majority of the students earned academic credit at SCQF level 7 (first year undergraduate). Completing the apprenticeship with higher education level credit is likely to help with both prospects for employment and the ability to access other forms of higher education. The students also have the option to continue with an Open University qualification, either immediately or later in their career. However, student outcomes are not simply confined to credit and improved opportunities for progression. Staff at the club commented on the synergy between commitment to study and the apprentices' approach to their football training. The first cohort of students also reflected on improved skills:

*I think a lot of my writing has got better, in the way that I would put stuff across in paper because I've done quite a lot of it.*

And also in maturity and approaches to study:

*I think for me its about a better understanding of the way how to work...like at school I just used to never concentrate, like to get a whole thing done but when I'm here I actually work for a few hours on a certain topic and get it*

*done...so a better understanding on how to work.*

*...it was a good thing to do I think, instead of just playing football...and give us something else if we're not gonna make it in football, got something else to help us and give us an idea of what we're gonna do.*

#### **4. The use of Open Educational Resources**

At the start of the 2014/15 there was a change to the financial support arrangements for the apprenticeship programme that meant that there was insufficient money available to pay for both the cost of facilitation and the module fees. While full-time undergraduate education in Scotland is free part-time modules still incur fees unless the student has an income below £25,000 per year. Apprentice incomes meet this criterion but because they are already funded by Skills Development Scotland it was understood that they were not eligible for the part-time fee grant. The decision was made to retain facilitation and to pilot a programme constructed from free OER courses. Responsibility for management and evaluation of the pilot was taken by the Opening Educational Practices in Scotland project ([www.oepscotland.org](http://www.oepscotland.org)).

From the beginning it was recognised that the use of OER had advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side the wide variety of good quality OER available allowed greater flexibility and an opportunity to tailor provision to student needs and developing interests. However, OER are not accredited, so the motivating factor of achieving higher education credit was no longer part of the equation. Flexibility also put a heavier workload on the facilitators who were in the position of putting together a curriculum without the benefit of a previous programme to build on.

The facilitators adapted a practice developed in previous years of involving the group in planning the 'course' and each week they would spend time in discussing progress and looking at what would be done next. The use of OER as the principal source of study material was less successful than using accredited modules. From the facilitators' reflections there seem to be a number of reasons for this. Much of the OER material was less well structured than the accredited modules and often written with a different audience in mind. The facilitators were able to compensate for both of these factors by adapting and customizing the material and how it was used. Of course openly licensed material can be reversioned but this would entail a longer term and larger scale project to be viable. Students were not less motivated than in previous years but the lack of a clear goal in terms of academic credit made it more difficult to generate motivation and focus. The most successful use of OER involved material on health and fitness that students were able to relate very closely to their professional activities. Later in the course some aspects of work on an OER module on employability also achieved useful engagement. The students related to the need to promote themselves to potential employers and discussed this in a mature and serious way. Like some of the other OER the material on employability was aimed at graduates and had to be heavily adapted. It was also aimed at individual learners and needed to be adapted to be used for a group.

There are broader issues here for the development and the use of open educational materials. An important part of good educational practice is an awareness of who the learners are and circumstances in which they learn. It's often the case that the learner is assumed to be an individual when in practice the materials may well be used in social settings where opportunities for peer engagement and support are really valuable.

The most successful parts of the programme resulted from the greater freedom allowed by the OER framework, The students engaged actively with planning and delivering a football training session for young people. The youth team coach assessed their performance and both he and the facilitator judged that they had done a very good job. The group also enjoyed practical sessions aimed at developing skills in buying food to a fixed budget that they then learnt how to cook.

The emphasis on practical skills connected to their professional interest could in principle have been enhanced by the use of supportive open resources. However, because the programme was a one-off and there was limited time for preparation identification and curation of appropriate resources was not possible.

## **5. Conclusion**

Apprenticeships are designed to provide a sound induction into specific vocational areas. Football apprenticeships are unusual in that relatively few of those involved go on to become professional footballers. Thus the non-football components of the apprenticeship should both reinforce the development of professional skills and also provide a platform for alternative career routes at the end of the apprenticeship. The facilitated workplace based model described in this report allows both of these objectives to be met.

The young men who have participated in the programme since 2009 have been highly motivated to succeed in their chosen profession. In most cases academic study has been a low priority and it has required considerable commitment by the facilitators to promote active engagement with academic study. However, experience across the cohorts suggests that, with appropriate support for skills development, apprentices are capable of achieving higher education credit and that the combination of group facilitation with good quality 'distance learning' materials and the OU's model of supported open learning is effective.

The role of the facilitators has been critical to the success of the work-based learning model. Evidence from other instances of workplace-based study suggests that attainment and retention requires a supportive social framework. The role of a facilitator in sustaining such frameworks is crucial although it should be noted that in many instances the individual or individuals involved does not need to be a professional educator. In the specific context of a football club and a group of apprentices who have come straight from school, however, experience suggests that the skill-set possessed by an experience OU Associate Lecturer is appropriate and necessary.

Utilising a curriculum comprised entirely of free open resources proved to be less satisfactory than providing the opportunity to study for credit. Given more time for preparation it would be possible to select and even modify OER resources that would provide appropriate learning outcomes across a range of subjects. However, this would only be viable if the programme was offered at significantly larger scale. Even if this were the case, from the student point of view, and particularly for the majority who are not offered professional contracts the ability to achieve some formal academic credit is an important feature of using modules from the formal university curriculum. However, there is still a role for OER as a means to developing more generic skills. There are now short, free, badged open courses available in specific subject areas and for the development of employability skills that could be used for induction into the work-based programme and for linking to the professional skills developed through the apprenticeship.

As well as further study at college or university apprentices have the possibility of applying for sports scholarships in the United States. This is an attractive alternative option and one in which they are much more likely to be successful with the acquisition of some HE credit and the development of learning skills during the course of the apprenticeship.