

NOVEMBER 2016 RESEARCH REFLECTION:

Collaboration between educators and industry to improve workplace learning

By Adelaide Reid

Ako Aotearoa recently released a report on a National Project Fund project that they have been working on with Downer, Connexis and Primary ITO*. The project aimed to improve the outcomes and retention of apprentices at Downer through establishing mentoring relationships within the organisation. Mentoring had been used previously at Downer but there was no clear mentoring approach and no strategy for working with the local Industry Training Organisation (ITO) staff who deliver training to apprentices. The idea was to align the support provided by ITOs with in-house mentoring in a more deliberate way to improve the support that apprentices received from both organisations. Over 18 months the project established and monitored a collaborative approach to mentoring between ITO staff and Downer employees, who acted as mentors to the apprentices. This approach is now being embedded within the organisation to ensure the development of sustainable mentoring practices at Downer.

What is interesting to me about this project is that it was carried out by a team of people with practical industry skills who had limited research experience. With the support of a research mentor they have been able to develop a programme which works for them, and have been open about the areas where improvement is needed. This appears to be down to a clear commitment to collaboration which was informed by the structure of the project.

One initial finding of the project was that there was a lack of clarity around the roles of ITO staff and mentors, and no clear indication of who was driving the relationship. This meant that after an initial meeting, there was little contact between the ITO and Downer staff. In addition, because roles were not clear, the potential value of this relationship to the mentoring process was not well understood.

In response to this a collaborative approach was developed which included establishing a shared understanding between Downer and the ITOs of what apprentice mentoring involves, and clearly defining the roles of ITOs and mentors in the mentoring process. Mentoring workshops were held to provide skills in active listening, focused questions and goal setting as well as advice for mentors on how to establish a mentoring relationship. Access to support for mentees around literacy, numeracy, employment and personal issues was established and several publications have been developed to support mentors including a mentor's handbook and how-to guide. This collaborative model drove the project and provided a good basis to evaluate the subsequent impact of the mentoring programme from the perspectives of mentors, ITO staff and the apprentices.



The aligned approach to mentoring was thought to be successful in increasing the retention and qualification completion rates of apprentices compared with apprentices at Downer who weren't participating in the mentoring programme. Although the initial project is now complete, the collaboration is ongoing and is informed by recommendations from the project on how both Downer and ITOs can further develop their roles within the mentoring programme. The introduction of the mentoring tools which were developed through the collaborative approach has been useful for both Downer and the ITOs.

The project revealed several challenges to collaboration. One of these was the tensions created by different demands placed on the parties involved in the collaboration, for example ITO's funding is dependent on apprentices achieving within certain timeframes, which does not necessarily align with the primary concerns of mentors and mentees. Another challenge was working within a big company at local levels. Within Downer, the project highlighted that a lack of time can negatively impact on mentoring. Mentors and mentees don't necessarily work together and it can be challenging to find a time to meet while also meeting the other demands of their roles in workplace.

I don't work in this sector, so the findings aren't directly relevant to my work but I think that the approach taken in this project could inform collaborative work at my own organisation. We work collaboratively with a number of groups at a local level to support young people and this project shows the value of building capacity and establishing needs and aims as part of a project. This is often seen as 'nice to have' but not practical in a context where there is always pressure to meet immediate needs. In this project, it was treated as an integral not an additional piece of work; this added value to the work undertaken and has contributed to the establishment of a model of practice which can be built on through further learning.

*Connexis and Primary ITO are industry training organisations (ITOs) who co-ordinate industry training. Their role includes education and training delivery and learning resource development.

<https://akoatearora.ac.nz/download/ng/file/group-9144/a-collaborative-approach-to-mentoring-a-model-for-industry-training-organisations-and-employers.pdf>

<https://akoatearora.ac.nz/projects/mentoring-model-itos-and-employers>