

# Project Success Story

## Institution

University of Exeter

## Project title

Level 7 Academic Professional Apprenticeship End-Point Assessment

## Background

The L7 Academic Professional Apprenticeship (L7 APA) is a standard that has been designed to develop early-career academics working in higher education settings. The standard has two specialist routes that an apprentice can follow – the teaching specialist route, and the research specialist route. At the end of the apprenticeship, every apprentice must undertake End-Point Assessment (EPA) in order to demonstrate competency, and ultimately complete their apprenticeship. EPA is carried out by an independent EPA organisation (EPAO) and Advance HE is the only EPAO for the L7 APA to have passed formal readiness checks. We have been delivering EPA since November 2019, with a team of 33 specialist independent assessors who carry out the assessments. This Project Success Story celebrates England's first L7 APA Research Specialist Route completion.

In May 2020, the University of Exeter received notification from Advance HE that the first apprentice on the Research Specialist Route had completed EPA. Other apprentices from Exeter, and elsewhere, had previously completed the Teaching Specialist Route, but this was a nationwide first for a L7 APA Research Specialist to complete the programme.

Dr Ian Ashton, Lecturer in Offshore Technology and located on the Cornwall Penryn campus of the University of Exeter was the first academic to reach this sector-wide milestone, and he reached it in outstanding style with an overall Distinction grade outcome.

## Our support

Advance HE, as the EPAO, recruited a team of 33 independent assessors (IA). Within this group we looked to establish a pool of IAs with the particular research expertise to guarantee we provided robust assessment for those apprentices on the Research Specialist Route. As such, on our journey to becoming an EPAO, we worked closely with Vitae in developing Research Specialist guidance material and in determining which of our IAs would be suitable to assess Research Specialist apprentices. A separate recruitment process was carried out by ourselves and Vitae to appoint nine IAs for this task. Following their recruitment, we provided our research route IAs with a series of in-

depth, regularly updated guidance material in addition to periodical standardisation training sessions.

## Success

Exeter University achieved this milestone by providing a dedicated support structure with a degree apprenticeship hub and central support as well as the appointment of a dedicated programme lecturer. This allowed Exeter to be one of the first providers to convert its Advance HE accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PCAP) into a degree apprenticeship: the Academic Professional Programme.

They have found a key benefit of converting the programme to a degree apprenticeship has been the requirement to demonstrate that participants spend 20 per cent of their time on 'off the job training'. This has allowed them to protect more time in their workload model for newer academics to engage with the programme than has previously been the case, and carve out a greater space for supporting newer staff in their professional development journeys.

Professor Anna Mountford-Zimdars, a Principal Fellow of Advance HE and the first programme director of the new apprenticeship said that, "We, the Academic Apprenticeship programme team at the University of Exeter are delighted to be at the forefront of supporting their newer academic colleagues in their development, whether they wish to focus on the research or teaching specialist pathway. We recognise the important role our academic professional apprentices will have in tackling the current challenges and opportunities of remote, online and blended education. We are looking forward to many more apprentices joining Dr Ian Ashton and his teaching-focused colleagues in becoming certified Level 7 Academic Professionals."

## Feedback

On completion of his submission, Dr Ian Ashton reflected: "Although it was not always easy to balance with competing demands, this course forces you to take time for reflection and personal development, which allowed me to develop in all areas of my practice, giving me space to become a more rounded academic and better understand the role that I have taken on".

Of those nine IAs recruited who were also eligible to assess Research Specialist apprentices, Dr Christine Smith, Associate Professor at University of Suffolk's Quality Assurance and Enhancement team, was the first marker for Ian's submission and provides her thoughts on delivering the EPA:

"I was delighted, but also admit to being a little apprehensive, in being asked to assess the first research specialist apprentice coming through the L7 APA. Apprehensive, because this was also my first assessment of an apprentice's EPA. However, I had no doubt when reviewing the first two of Ian's assessments – the written submission and the Academic Professional Practice Assessment (APPA) – that there was a strong and compelling case being presented for the EPA.

“In the written submission, Ian provided a diverse range of evidence, accompanied by a reflective account drawn from across his practice, that collectively demonstrated both environmental and sustainability impact and potential. Ian had been nicely able to articulate his developing research strategy, but was also aware of the importance to continue to grow and seek opportunities for further development. The strong interconnections between his research and teaching shone through and were expansive: in assisting the development of new research projects; in building networks; and in embedding employability into the curriculum and learning experiences for his students.

“The APPA evidence consisted of both a narrated and critically reflective set of PowerPoint slides and a set of short video clips taken directly from a research seminar led by Ian. This format for the APPA worked well, because it enabled Ian to give an articulate account of his research *and* its interconnections with his teaching. Ian spoke with conviction around the design of the learning environment for his undergraduate and postgraduate students; including bringing in a range of researchers and external experts and creating a stimulating and innovative experience for the learners. There was recognition of the challenges his students face and reflections on how to make the learning environment engaging, yet challenging.

“The third element of assessment was the professional conversation (PC). The PC provided a valued opportunity for me to engage directly with Ian, and to hear him speak with enthusiasm and commitment for both his research and his work with students. The PC made it fully apparent that Ian has developed an insightful understanding of his own environment and the dilemmas researchers face; not least around being collaborative, when research funding is so competitively driven.

“Overall, Ian put together a strong and positive account that I really enjoyed assessing. His Distinction was deserved from the clarity of evidence he presented around his evolving practice as a researcher/teacher and in his development during the apprenticeship.”

As CEO at Vitae/CRAC, Clare Viney, explains, the L7 APA “defines the research aspects of academic career pathways using the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF), opening a channel for recognition of the specialist research role. It also signals that the research competencies expected in an academic role are aligned to the Vitae RDF and ‘formalises’ researcher development. We have been pleased to work with Advance HE to successfully bring together the researcher and teaching frameworks - Vitae (RDF) & UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) – via the L7 APA end-point assessment.”

Dr Nicola Watchman Smith, Head of Academic Apprenticeships and Excellence Awards at Advance HE echoed Vitae’s recognition of the impact of the research route and the Academic Professional Apprenticeship more widely: “This apprenticeship is providing university and college academic staff a route to professional development that is acknowledged by all across the higher education sector. As Head of the EPAO service

at Advance HE, I am delighted to see such a positive uptake of the L7 APA as a route to HE staff development, recognising what this engagement signals in terms of sector-wide collective and collaborative enhancement of our professional standards. I wish to congratulate Dr Ashton on becoming the first research route L7 APA apprentice and I extend these congratulations to all of the successful Academic Professionals to date.”

For more information about Advance HE’s EPA service, [please visit our website](#) or contact us via [endpointassessment@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:endpointassessment@advance-he.ac.uk).