

# Case Study

Healthcare Science Apprenticeship  
Career Pathways  
University Hospital Southampton  
NHS Foundation Trust

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# Introduction

University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust offers a wide range of laboratory and pathology services including: histopathology, neuropathology, biomedical imaging, cytology, mortuary, chemical pathology, haematology, immunology, molecular pathology microbiology and virology.

The Trust employs 180 Healthcare Science staff to undertake this work in roles ranging from band 2 and 3 Laboratory Assistants, band 4 Assistant Practitioners through to band 5 Biomedical Scientists, band 6 Specialist and Clinical Scientists, band 7 Advanced Scientists and Advanced Practitioners and band 8 Managers.

In 2021 the service undertook over 6.2 million clinical laboratory requests to help the diagnosis, monitoring and treatment of a broad range of conditions and diseases and is a key part of the clinical healthcare team.

## What was the issue/problem that needed to be addressed?

There was a need to ensure all healthcare science staff were fully trained and competent and for them to be offered a career pathway once they were employed in laboratory roles.

Training courses are expensive and funding for education required for progression was limited.

There were limited courses available at the correct level and specifically for healthcare science. There were limited options for staff to progress from a band 2 or 3 Laboratory Assistant to a band 4 Associate Practitioner for example, which was mostly through training and experience.

For most staff the only way they could progress further to being a registered band 5 Biomedical Scientist was by gaining a degree, which they could only achieve by leaving the Trust to go to university full time. In turn, this lack of opportunity and progression led to staff attrition. The Trust was unable to 'grow their own'

healthcare scientists or support keen and capable staff to progress to more senior roles, which the service required.

## What action was taken to address the issue?

The Trust has taken advantage of apprenticeships to support staff progression. The development of new apprenticeship standards in recent years (which are offered from entry levels 1 and 2 through to degree and post graduate levels) has gathered momentum, and more with a science focus are now available.

As the Trust, like all large employers, now also has to pay an Apprenticeship Levy it makes sense to utilise these routes to fund training and qualifications and engage local colleges and universities to help invest in and develop staff.

Apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3 now provide staff with the relevant qualification to progress onto the degree programme, which the Trust also offers to its staff. The Trust has also used apprenticeships to recruit staff to



specific roles. There were issues recruiting in the Biomedical Imaging Unit and they advertised and recruited two new apprentices into Band 4 Assistant Practitioner roles and onto the level 6 Healthcare Science Practitioner apprenticeship programme, which is awarded a BSc (Hons) Applied Biomedical Science Degree. On completion of their qualification, they will progress onto the Band 5 role. The Trust hopes to do more of this in the future.

Currently the Trust is trying to implement apprenticeship programmes to train a backlog of their existing employees who are keen to progress and could not otherwise access expensive qualifications to meet their career goals and service staffing needs.

### **What difficulties and barriers needed to be overcome to implement the change?**

As apprentices need to spend 20% of their time training 'off the job' (which is about one day a week), there is a challenge around back-fill and funding, which limits the

number of apprentices that can be supported. Access to other funding besides the apprenticeship levy (which only funds the qualification) would enable the Trust to support more staff. The Trust recognises that to overcome this, it needs to approach workforce planning differently, for example by planning to staff at 80% so that roles have capacity for training time.

An initial barrier was a lack of understanding and engagement by managers about apprenticeships, so the Trust training department have spent much time with managers explaining the process. Science apprenticeships are a small number of the total apprenticeships in the Trust, so trainers need to be well informed and persistent to ensure they are part of the whole Trust apprenticeship programme and approach to workforce planning.

### **What benefits have resulted from the change?**

The Trust has seen staff progress from levels 2, 3 and 4 via apprenticeships to move forward in

their careers and fill the Assistant Practitioner roles in the labs so feel this is very successful. Some of these staff will go on to do the level 6 Healthcare Science Practitioner Degree Apprenticeship, which is offered by Westminster University to develop as a Band 5 Biomedical Scientist- the portfolio of evidence required for HCPC registration is embedded in the programme.

*"We have not had the level 6 degree apprenticeship going long enough to reap the rewards, but I'm pretty sure we will be able to employ the successful learners as registered Biomedical Scientists. There is now great retention and job satisfaction of the staff involved with apprenticeships."*

**Sarah Bruty, Training Lead, Laboratory Medicine**

There is now a gradual change in approach from managers. They have always understood the importance of training and qualifications, particularly in laboratories where staff need to be taught how to undertake a task to a high standard, but have only more recently come to realise how important career progression is to staff and ultimately the service. Apprenticeships offer a route to gain qualifications, and ultimately support the opportunity for career progression which is important to staff and in turn supports the service.

Apprenticeships are a viable option for staff development, progression and recruitment and make use of the levy to fund qualifications.

**Apprenticeships offer a route to gain qualifications and ultimately support the opportunity for career progression.**

## What tips can you pass on to other NHS employers considering apprenticeships?

It's important to share information with local education providers to advertise, explain and recruit potential new apprentices. All pathology departments are now part of 29 NHSE&I Pathology Networks in England, so it is important to share best practice across network trusts and collaborate with stakeholder partners including universities.

One of the goals of the networks is to "use apprenticeships and assistant practitioner training to support staff growth development across the network", so moving from an organisation to network approach where it is sensible to do so.

As there is still the 'fear of the unknown' amongst some managers about apprenticeships it is important to provide them with information, promoting their value as an excellent training route for recruitment, succession and progression as part of the workforce planning process.

The best Trust tip is: when having one to one learning and development reviews with healthcare science staff, who will be focusing on their

options for career pathways, that information about apprenticeships is provided by a fully informed trainer.

"Apprenticeships have really worked for us appreciating that there is still work to do in totally embedding them by fully raising awareness with managers, incorporating into job descriptions, and staff appraisals and gaining a commitment that all staff have a pathway and so have the skills to do a good job."

Jo Horne, Education Manager  
Cellular Pathology

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Skills for Health is a not-for-profit organisation committed to the development of an improved and sustainable healthcare workforce across the UK. Established in 2002 as the Sector Skills Council for Health for the UK health sector, it is the authoritative voice on workforce skills issues and offers proven solutions and tools, with the expertise and experience to use them effectively.

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