Introduction to Work-Based Projects

Apprentice and Employer Guide

Leadership and Management Apprenticeships at Manchester Met

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Manchester Metropolitan University

Contents

1 | Introduction

Work-based projects are an important element of degree apprenticeships at Manchester Met. They provide a crucial opportunity for apprentices to apply academic knowledge to real-life situations and demonstrate a range of skills and behaviours as outlined in the apprenticeship standards.

Smaller work-based projects are completed throughout the duration of apprenticeship programmes, but a large-scale synoptic project is undertaken toward the end of every programme, often in the final year of study. This synoptic project is of particular importance because it forms a part of the End-Point Assessment (EPA) process that concludes the apprenticeship element of the programme. An outline of individual project units on your course can be found in appendix A.

Work-based projects are negotiated between the apprentice, employer and University and allow apprentices to provide a valuable contribution to their organisation. Projects might resolve a particular business issue or case or help to develop a new process, product or procedure in the workplace. Projects should not be 'business as usual' and employers are encouraged to help apprentices to identify a suitably challenging project which will add value back into the organisation.

The process of completing a work-based project should also enable apprentices to reflect on their own ways of working and develop a broad range of sector-specific and management skills. Learning from undertaking a project may involve such things as establishing a business case for the project, exploring literature on a particular topic, introducing changes to practice, evaluating processes or procedures, writing a report on action or completing a horizon scan on the future impacts of the project.

This immersive process will require apprentices to develop an in-depth insight into their organisation and work collaboratively with their colleagues, mentors and University supervisors. The work-place mentor will act as a vital support point for apprentices during the completion of projects, helping them to gain access to information and resources as well as facilitating wider support.

__Please note__: The purpose of this document is to provide a general overview of work-based projects on degree apprenticeship programme at Manchester Met. Please use this in conjunction with the relevant unit handbooks, which outline any specific academic requirements. Additional information and support guides can be found on our employer resources page at www.mmu.ac.uk/apprenticeships/resources/chartered-manager/*.*

2 | What is a work-based project?

A project can be considered 'a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result' (Project Management Institute, 2018: online). This means that a project should involve an element of change management and require the apprentice to manage a project through different stages or milestones to achieve agreed objectives.

Crucially, a project should not be 'business as usual' and should require the creation or production of a new product, process, procedure or understanding. The specific outcomes and deliverables will obviously look different for each individual project.

Similarly, a project should require a degree of independent working by the apprentice, especially in the initial stages of scoping out suitable projects based on organisational need and strategy. In short, whilst we encourage employers to help apprentices to locate a suitable project in the organisation, please encourage them to take ownership early in the process and provide enough space for them to scope out and explore the topic or issue in detail.

As such, projects are a fantastic vehicle through which apprentices can develop and practice a range of critical skills and behaviours and in turn provide excellent evidence for their apprenticeship portfolio (eg decision making, negotiation, communication etc).

Work-based project expectations:

- It is expected that the project will be completed at the employer's premises or specialist location based on the project plan

- It is expected that there will be an appropriate employer representative who will oversee and mentor the apprentice during the project delivery

- Apprentices will be allocated a University project supervisor who will support and help underpin the project with relevant theories or approaches

- It is expected that the project will be completed as part of the apprentices normal working day so that it can be counted as part of the 20% off-the-job development time requirement

- It is expected that the apprentice will follow the relevant code of conduct for their professional field or sector when carrying out your project, for example the *Code of Conduct and Practice* from the Chartered Management Institute (CMI).

Team projects and long-term projects

If the apprentice is completing a project as part of a wider project team, then they should discuss the project with the University supervisor to ascertain if the topic is appropriate and that there is sufficient scope to justify an individual project. The project must enable the apprentice to demonstrate that THEY have made an impact on the project and that THEY contributed to the definition, design and management of the project.

Similarly, a work-based project may also be part of a broader or longer-term organisational project that extends beyond the time constraints of a particular unit. Once again, in these cases the apprentice should discuss the project with their supervisor or unit leader. In these cases, we encourage apprentices to identify the 'slice' or section of the project for which they are responsible, and outline their individual contribution in terms of the project definition, design, delivery and review for their particular stage of ownership.

Managing Risk and Ethical Considerations

When considering each project topic, apprentices should ensure that they have buy-in from their employer to ensure they are able to investigate, research and explore their selected topic in detail. In addition apprentices will need to consider the ethical implications of their project as outlined below:

- The project should *do no harm* – which includes emotional and mental distress, and financial, social and professional standing.

- Ensure anonymity is preserved throughout by complying with your own organisation rules surrounding data and confidentiality; if in doubt check with the data controller and seek appropriate approval.

There may be some topics that will require further ethical considerations prior to any approval being granted by the University, for example, if your research for the work-based project requires participation of those under the age of 16 or adults lacking the capacity to provide consent. It is important that apprentices discuss their ideas early in order to facilitate the smooth navigation through the applicable ethical approval process.

All projects will require sign-off from an employer representative.

3 | Key elements of a work-based project

Throughout the programme, apprentices will be taught and encouraged to critique and reflect on different project management approaches and methodologies such as waterfall and agile. All projects are unique, and when designing their project, apprentices will be encouraged to identify an approach which is suitable to their individual project requirements, conditions and management style.

Therefore, what constitutes a project 'lifecycle' will be highly dependent on the nature of the individual project and how it fits with the wider organisational planning. That said, we are looking for work-based projects which allow the apprentice to demonstrate critical skills throughout the entire project life-cycle:

- **Define:** a clear purpose or goal is defined based on a valid business problem or case. Clear objectives and deliverables are set which are aligned to strategic aims.

- **Design:** a plan of work is constructed which might include visual plans, terms of reference, assumptions and consequences, stakeholder engagement and financial plans. Controls and milestones are clearly outlined prior to the start of a project.

- **Do:** on-project activities are undertaken and there is evidence of analysis and reflection on how these contributed to the achievement of the project purpose or goals. Decisions are taken and controls utilised.

- **Review:** project delivery and outcomes are analysed and reviewed. Barriers and challenges to success, and strategies used to overcome these, are analysed.

4 | Topic selection and project scope

When selecting an appropriate topic for a work-based project, apprentices should first consider the emerging issues and problems in their organisation. Projects are an opportunity for apprentices to explore their organisation in more detail and at a higher, strategic level.

Work-based Projects need to provide apprentices with sufficient opportunity to make a real contribution or improvement to their organisation (or organisational unit), through what they do and/or learn. Therefore projects should be substantial pieces of original work. However, apprentices should be realistic with the scope and expectations of the project when selecting a suitable topic. Asking the questions below, may assist with this process:

- *What are the current issues and challenges being faced by the organisation or within the wider sector? Are there new initiatives that could be tested?*

- *What is the growth strategy for your organisation and what is holding back this growth?*

- *What PESTEL factors are having or could have an impact on business continuity?*

- *What new solutions could be implemented to solve problems that have been identified?*

- *Is the idea complex enough for the level of study i.e. scope, level of responsibility etc?*

5 | Examples of successful work-based projects from different sectors

- **Education:** a primary school teacher designed and introduced a new whole-school approach to wellbeing at their school. After gaining support from the governing body, she established a new wellbeing team, created a new dedicated wellbeing area and ran a number of wellbeing initiatives for pupils and staff. She monitored impact through questionnaires, determining that awareness of wellbeing had increased as a result of the project.

- **Health and Social Work:** a practice manager in a GP practice created a new link worker position who would lead on new social prescribing initiatives across multiple practices. New referral and reporting mechanisms were established and the success of the project monitored through regular feedback from the different stakeholders.

- **Retail:** A retail manager of a large chain reviewed the current processes of a service in order to identify efficiencies. By implementing a lean methodology, new procedures and staff training, he reduced processing time for each transaction by 4 seconds. When implemented across the entire organisation, this resulted in savings of around £170,000 to the organisation.

- **Logistics and Operations:** an apprentice modelled the impact of bringing an outsourced service back in-house by analysing current staff time and potential cost savings. The service was then brought back in-house and new processes were introduced in order to streamline the service, further increasing savings to the organisation.

6 | Project support

Apprentices are expected to take the lead on work-based projects, however the support offered by successful mentors and University supervisors in relation to work-based projects is outlined below.

Employer Mentor Involvement

M: Meet regularly with apprentices and plan ahead to ensure dates are scheduled for reviewing project milestones and review of deliverables

E: Encourage apprentices through the whole project, helping them to identify barriers to success and strategies for overcoming these. Not all projects will be successful, and you can provide a valuable sounding for apprentices when things go wrong.

N: Negotiate project topics and scope with apprentices to ensure that they link to their organisation and have clear and meaningful impact. Ensure that the complexity of the project enables the apprentice to apply knowledge and demonstrate a range of skills and behaviours from the standard whilst meeting the specific academic requirements of the applicable project unit.

T: Target development areas and guide apprentices on resource or training information in order for the required knowledge, skills and behaviour gaps to be addressed.

O: Offer ongoing support and attend progress reviews and other manager and mentor information sessions to share best practice and stay up to date with requirements and developments.

R: Remind apprentices about positive time management. This is key and managing this is a skill apprentices should demonstrate as part of any project. Mentors should also champion off-the-job development and encourage apprentices to use their 20% off-the-job development time to complete their work-based projects and develop applicable skills and behaviours.

S: Signpost learners to helpful information, share knowledge and expertise in relation to the organisation and enable apprentices to gain access to relevant internal resources and information.

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University Supervisor – allocated by the University

Apprentices will be allocated an academic member of the teaching team, who will act as their work-based project supervisor. Apprentices are encouraged to be pro-active and seek the support of their project supervisor. As part of their role supervisors will:

- Talk over ideas with apprentices

- Suggest reading materials and resources

- Help with structuring, write-up and particular unit requirements

- Set objectives and targets

- Offer 1-to-1 supervisions for the project

- Offer remote support via telephone/ email (where appropriate)

A project supervisor will NOT:

- Read (whole) drafts of assignment work

- Proof read

- Chase apprentices for updates

Please note that all apprentices can access 121 academic and study skills support from a dedicated Academic Support Tutor by requesting an appointment via studyskills@mmu.ac.uk.

7 | Individual project unit assignments and documentation

Most apprentices will complete work-based projects throughout their apprenticeship, culminating in a final synoptic project that forms part of the End-Point Assessment. Project units often run alongside other academic units of study for the duration of the academic year. In these cases, it is important to set clear milestones and ensure good time management is practiced, as a project left until the last minute will rarely be a success.

Unlike other academic units, apprentices are likely to submit substantial project documentation rather than a single essay or report for their assignment. This documentation will demonstrate how they have defined, designed and delivered the project through its various stages and might include, financial schedules, communication plans or risk registers. Most projects will also require a project proposal or Project Initiation Document (PID). Whilst the University will provide templates for this documentation, apprentices are encouraged to use existing organisation templates if suitable. Specific expectations and requirements are always outline clearly in individual unit handbooks.

Synoptic Projects

Towards the end of the programme, apprentices will undertake a large-scale synoptic project which is a key part of the degree programme and apprenticeship requirements. This substantial piece of work will be assessed as part of the formal degree qualification and also as part of the independent End Point Assessment (EPA), which might be conducted by an external organisation such as the Chartered Management Institute (CMI).

Whilst the EPA is designed to assess occupational competency, we have aligned our academic requirements to those of the EPA as much as possible, to ensure that apprentices are fully prepared for the EPA process.

This final project is called *synoptic* because it is the accumulation of the apprentices' knowledge, skills and behaviours that have been developed across the apprenticeship. The project should be a substantial piece of work aligned to organisational strategy that demonstrates and develops a range of higher-level critical and managerial skills.

Due to the significant and size of this synoptic project, we encourage apprentices and employers to engage in discussions about suitable projects early in the apprenticeship.

8 | Additional support and guidance

Employer resources page:

www.mmu.ac.uk/apprenticeships/resources/chartered-manager/.

Apprenticeship Standards and Assessment Plans:

Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA):	www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/chartered-manager/
Retail Leadership Degree Apprenticeship:	www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/retail-leadership-degree-apprenticeship/
Senior Leader MBA Degree Apprenticeship:	www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/senior-leader/

Additional online resources:

Linkedin Learning	www.mmu.ac.uk/isds/support/apps/linkedin-learning/
CMI Resources	www.managers.org.uk/individuals/existing-members/managementdirect
CMI Events	www.managers.org.uk/events-and-courses
MMU Library Resources	https://libguides.mmu.ac.uk/librarysearch
SCONUL library information	www.sconul.ac.uk/sconul-access

Suggested project management books and guides:

Biggs, D. (2010) *Management consulting: a guide for students*, Andover: South-Western Cengage Learning.

Coghlan, D., & Brannick, T. (2014) *Doing Action Research in your own organization*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cottrell, S. M. (2014) *Dissertations and project reports: A step by step guide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

Heagney, J. (2016) *Fundamentals of project management*, Fifth edn, AMACOM, New York, [New York]. (Full text available online MMU library)

Lock, D. (2013) *Project Management*. 10th ed, Farnham: Gower Publishing.

International Journal of Project Management: https://www.journals.elsevier.com/international-journal-of-project-management

Project Management Institute Journal https://www.pmi.org/learning/publications/project-management-journal

Appendix A | Overview of project units

CMDA Business Professional (Four-Year Programme): Years 1 and 2

Year	Description	Assessments
	Unit title: Introduction to Projects and Portfolio (Level 4)	
1	In this unit, apprentices will explore the need for continuous improvement in organisations, the role and importance of business projects and the challenges encountered in project management. Teaching will include business case studies to understand the nature of change and project management tools and methods. Within this unit, apprentices will scope out, identify and diagnose a problem or business case in their organisation and recommend a small project for implementation. This unit allows the apprentice to become familiar with the underpinning knowledge required for project management.	70%: Apprentices will write a business report (2,500 words) which explores emerging business needs or problems. The report should analyse these issues with reference to secondary data and reports and suggest recommendations for possible suitable projects. 30%: Apprentices will select evidence and demonstrate their development against the apprenticeship standard (1,500 words).
	Unit title: Initial Business Project (Level 4)	
2	In this unit apprentices will design and deliver a small project in the workplace focusing on the resolution of a business issue within their immediate working environment. They will write a project proposal and then deliver the project in the workplace. This unit allows the apprentice to become familiar with the application of project management methods within a local environment. Apprentices will be taught project management tools and will be supported by a project supervisor to help them apply project management tools and reflect on their role as a leader and manager and the outcomes of their project.	25%: Apprentices will develop a basic Project Initiation Plan (PID) of around 1,000 words that will define the nature of a project, including how the projects links to strategic and business objectives, how the project will be managed, controlled and communicated. The proposal will be supported by brief supplementary documentation, such as a project sign-off document, financial and communications details. 45%: On completion of a work-based project the apprentice will produce a summary project report (2,000 words) following standard project report guidelines. The report will be supported by brief supplementary documentation such as, project review and highlight reports, revised project plans, a reflection on the project and summary financial plans. 30%: Apprentices will select evidence and demonstrate their development against the apprenticeship standard (1,500 words)
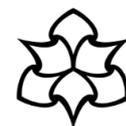
**CMDA Business Professional (Four-Year Programme): Year 3 and 4 *and*
CMDA Executive Fast Track (2.5 year Programme): Years 1 and 2**

Year	Description	Assessments
	Unit title: Project Development (Level 6)	
3 (1)	In this unit, apprentices will undertake consultancy into a significant business issue. In addition to exploring the sector, organisation and academic sources, they will become familiar with a range of advanced project management tools and their application to project management and develop a Project Initiation Document that will define the nature of a project, including the project's link to strategic and business objectives, how the project will be managed, controlled and communicated.	40%: Apprentices will produce a consultation document (2,500 words) summarising the sector, organisation and academic context of the project recommendations. 60%: Apprentices will develop an advanced Project Initiation Plan (PID) of around 3,500 words that will define the nature of a project, including the project's link to strategic and business objectives, how the project will be managed, controlled and communicated. The recommendations will be supported by thorough supplementary documentation, such as a project sign off document, a project plan, a risk identification document, a financial plan and a marketing and communications plan.
	Unit title: Synoptic Business Project (Level 6)	
4 (2)	In this unit, apprentices will implement a significant management project in the workplace, which they will manage through key milestones. The scope of this project will be broad enough to allow the apprentice to develop and evidence most of the competencies and skills from the CMDA standard (eg finance, sales and marketing, strategy etc).	70% Apprentices will produce work-based project report (4,500 words) with supporting documentation concerning the management of the project. The report will follow standard project report guidelines and will be supported by comprehensive supplementary documentation such as project review and highlight reports, revised project plans, summary financial plans and controls and a reflection on the project success. 30%: Apprentices will deliver a 15-minute presentation on the outcomes of their project followed by questioning. The presentation will cover all aspects of the project, from initiation through to evaluation.
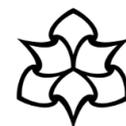
CMDA Business Professional (Executive) in Health and Social Care

Year	Description	Assessments
1	**Ongoing support from the skills coach** Ongoing support from the skills coach to develop the apprenticeship portfolio and scope out possible synoptic business project ideas with the employer during the first year of study. Introductory sessions to the Synoptic Business Project towards the end of the first year.	
2	**Project Management and Portfolio (Level 6)** In this unit, apprentices will complete a work-based project and apprenticeship portfolio. The project will be negotiated between the employer, the unit tutor and the apprentice. For the project, apprentices will understand the nature of a work-based project and how that is underpinned by scholarly research and Project Management techniques. Apprentices will be taught project methods. They will reflect this learning work-based project negotiated between themselves, the tutor, and their workplace mentor / manager. For the portfolio, apprentices will be introduced to the Apprenticeship standard which includes the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours underpinning the CMDA. Teaching will introduce apprentices to the Portfolio, and guide them through the process of evidencing the demonstration of their Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours against the CMDA apprenticeship standard.	70%: The student will submit a final project report on a synoptic project that they developed, operated and completed. The final project report will explore the project stages: including its inception, aims and objectives, operation and activities, outcomes and evaluation. The main report will be 4-5,000 words in length. Additional supplementary documentation may include the following, the project initiation document, project plans, risk evaluations and Health and Safety implications,, marketing and communications plans, financial, mid-project reviews and highlight report, reflections on decision-making issues and challenges/changes and a final project evaluation. 30%: The apprentice will capture their learning, demonstration of skills and behaviours and curate it against the CMDA apprenticeship standard in a Portfolio. Where applicable, they should append commentaries to the evidence. This portfolio is assessed within the degree, and then sent forward to the End-Point Assessment for the Degree Apprenticeship.
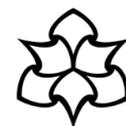
Senior Leader MBA Degree Apprenticeship

Year	Description	Assessments
1	**Ongoing support from the skills coach**	
	Ongoing support from the skills coach to develop the apprenticeship portfolio and scope out possible synoptic business project ideas with the employer during the first year of study. Introductory sessions to the Synoptic Business Project towards the end of the first year.	
2	**Executive Business Project (Level 7)**	
	Students will define a complex strategic issue within their organisation that carries company approval and then plan, lead, implement and evaluate the project. The project will draw upon knowledge of functional business disciplines within previous MBA units. Students will produce a substantial written document of their achievements and conclusions. This is a work-based project, which is underpinned by scholarly research and project management techniques. It will require a consulting approach to fieldwork (primary research) in their employing organisation with the objective of offering an appropriate medium to long-term solution to the business that draws out the implications for wider managerial professional practice and stakeholders.	15%: Individual Project Proposal (4,000 words). The apprentice will complete a project initiation document (PID) which has approval and sign-off from the employer. The PID will outline the nature and plan for the research project and explores how it is underpinned by academic theory and literature. 85%: A substantive written executive business project report of typically 10,000 words with supporting project documentation. The report will illustrate the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of the project. *Upon completion, a project showcase version of this project will be included in the Masters Business Portfolio unit. This will involve producing a 4,000-word synopsis of the final executive business project report which is assessed both in the degree, and in the 'End Point Assessment' (EPA) of the apprenticeship. As part of the EPA, apprentices will also deliver a 20-minute presentation on the outcomes of the project.*