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Professor George Holmes
Vice Chancellor
University of Bolton
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Dear Professor Holmes

Short inspection of the University of Bolton

Following the short inspection on 28 and 29 March 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in February 2014.

This provider continues to be good.

Since the previous inspection, you have continued to provide two access to higher education programmes that support local people, many from disadvantaged communities, to have the opportunity to progress to university. In partnership with local employers and with full endorsement from the General Dental Council, you have developed a higher apprenticeship in dental technology to meet a local skills gap in this industry.

Your students and higher apprentices receive good-quality education and training, and demonstrate high standards in all aspects of their learning. The vast majority of students on the access to higher education programmes make good progress and achieve well; many achieve above expectations from their starting points. Your lecturers and personal tutors ensure that students quickly overcome any barriers to learning. As a result, the vast majority of these students progress to degree-level study. Your staff use their specialist subject knowledge and relevant industrial experience effectively to develop the academic knowledge and practical skills of students and higher apprentices.

You provide high levels of care, support and guidance which students and higher apprentices value greatly, and this contributes to their good progress. Students on the access to higher education programmes are well supported in developing their personal goals and career aspirations. The university experience that you provide to your students raises their ambitions, helps them to develop confidence and motivates them to achieve. For example, they benefit from attending university seminars given by external speakers, which broaden their learning.

Your lecturers create an enjoyable learning environment which supports students and higher apprentices to learn and progress well. High-quality resources support learning; for example, dental technology higher apprentices benefit from the latest industry-standard technology.

Overall, and especially during the last year, you have paid particular and successful attention to improving the standards of teaching, learning and assessment on the access to higher education programme, and this is reflected in the recent improvement in students' outcomes. Your self-assessment arrangements at course level identify correctly weaker areas and you are now taking appropriate steps to tackle areas that require improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

Managers have continued to safeguard and promote students' well-being and to ensure that safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements. Students and higher apprentices report that they feel safe and know whom to contact if they have any concerns. Actions taken following safeguarding disclosures are timely and appropriate. Staff complete confidential and detailed incident logs that follow any disclosure through to resolution.

All safeguarding policies and procedures are up to date. Managers ensure that appropriate recruitment procedures are followed. They carry out comprehensive checks on the suitability of prospective employees. Staff have been trained appropriately to undertake risk assessments at employers' premises and this supports the health and safety of higher apprentices when they are in the workplace.

'Prevent' duty arrangements are highly effective. Staff are trained appropriately and know what to do if they are concerned about students' or higher apprentices' behaviour or welfare. Students and higher apprentices receive training on the 'Prevent' duty at induction. The students' union also promotes understanding of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism and raises students' levels of understanding and the potential impact of such matters on their lives. Designated officers have an effective network of external links that provide additional support and information to protect all members of the student body.

Students show a good understanding of e-safety and their online activities are monitored appropriately through the effective use of appropriate software.

Managers provide counselling support in addition to support and information on drug and alcohol abuse, bullying and harassment. Confidential help and support are available at designated areas within the university. The university, in partnership with the police, operates 'safety zones' across the town centre for those students who feel intimidated or who have been victims of crime.

Inspection findings

- The access to higher education managers improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in 2015/16. As a result, the vast majority of students achieved their qualifications and most students progressed to higher education courses. Most of the current students are on track to achieve merit or distinction grades in their qualifications. Students have benefited from a number of initiatives to help them achieve this success, for example the 'positive psychology' approach through which students receive training on 'grit' and 'resilience', which helps them to establish high aspirations.
- Lecturers value and benefit from a range of staff development initiatives and support that helps them to improve their practice. This includes opportunities to study for academic qualifications, carry out research and develop their teaching practices, including the skills required to be an effective personal tutor.
- The new performance review processes have increased the accountability of managers. Senior leaders set clear targets and managers' performance is monitored against targets such as students' progression, attendance and achievement rates. As a result, managers have a greater focus on what they need to do to improve the quality of their courses.
- The access to higher education courses provide a broad range of opportunities for students who have little previous educational achievement to help them gain a level 3 qualification. During induction, students' abilities, including English and mathematics, are assessed accurately to establish an individualised programme to help them achieve. Lecturers encourage students to set their own challenging targets and subsequent learning strategies in order to empower them as independent students.
- The new and effective electronic tracking and monitoring system helps deadlines to be met, lecturers to monitor students' progress, and keeps students on track to achieve. Additionally, lecturers track grades for assignments discretely. Higher apprentices have a detailed personal development plan, which enables staff to monitor their progress against learning outcomes and to provide support both for academic and practical tasks as appropriate.
- There are no discernible gaps in the performance of different groups of students by age, gender or ethnicity. Lecturers and assessors monitor the progress made by all students and higher apprentices effectively.
- Managers ensure that all higher apprentices benefit from working in a variety of dental laboratories to gain expertise across a range of dental manufacturing processes, for example orthodontic appliances and different dental implants. This provides them with the skills that future employers will require.
- Students and higher apprentices are well prepared for their future careers and aspirations. They benefit from high-quality personal tutoring, exposure to the university experience or appropriate employment in the dental industry. On the access to higher education courses, students benefit from additional sessions on developing their research and academic writing skills. Higher apprentices receive useful support from a trained mentor to develop their workplace skills.

- Students benefit from effective support and are prepared well for transition to degree-level study. Former students provide good support to current students that helps them to understand how to overcome challenges, manage their workloads and gain in confidence.
- Lecturers integrate the development of students' English skills in subject lessons well. The vast majority of students learn from their mistakes and do not repeat spelling and punctuation errors. Many students receive additional English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) support. However, lecturers do not routinely help students to identify errors in grammar and expression that affect the quality of their writing.
- Managers and programme leaders have rectified most of the areas for improvement since the last inspection. While interventions to ensure that students remain on the access to higher education courses were effective in 2015/16, around one in five students that enrolled in the current year have left the course.
- The university's self-assessment processes are well developed. However, key issues are not communicated sufficiently to senior leaders in the university. Consequently, they are unaware of the quality of the further education provision and how it can be improved.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they are fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the quality of the further education provision in the university and what actions are required to sustain and improve it
- the new staff performance management processes are implemented consistently and effectively
- an effective strategy is implemented from September 2017 to improve retention rates and that fewer students leave their access to higher education course before completing it
- students for whom English is an additional language develop appropriate skills in grammar and expression in order to communicate correctly for their level of study and their future aspirations.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Suzanne Wainwright
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we were assisted by the head of school for education and psychology, as nominee. We visited all curriculum areas and courses at the university that were in scope for the inspection. All observations were conducted jointly with university staff. We held meetings with governors, leaders, managers, lecturers, tutors and support staff. We covered curriculum and support activities. We considered the views of the comments received on Ofsted's online questionnaires.