

# Staffordshire University

## Interim visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 133882

**Name of lead inspector:** Martin Ward, HMI

**Visit date(s):** 21 to 22 October 2020

**Type of provider:** Higher education institution

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## Interim visit

### Context and focus of visit

On 17 March 2020, all routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out 'interim visits' to further education and skills providers. Interim visits are to help learners, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of learners and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

We intend to return to routine inspection in January 2021 but will keep the exact timing under review.

The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below and the findings are based on discussions with leaders, managers, staff and learners.

### Information about the provider

Staffordshire University was inspected in May 2019, and it received a monitoring visit in January 2020.

At the time of the visit there were 207 apprentices, 36 of which were enrolled very recently. Some 130 apprentices were on level 5 apprenticeships in healthcare, and 65 on level 5 apprenticeships in business management. Twelve apprentices were on level 4 apprenticeships in information technology (IT) and software development. All learners were on standards-based apprenticeships.

Staffordshire University also deliver a wide range of higher-level apprenticeships at level 6 and 7. These were not in scope for this visit.

### **What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of learners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?**

Senior managers described how they had accelerated the strategy to increase the proportion of online teaching. They explained how they had invested in technology, software and staff training to support this.

Managers outlined how COVID-19 (coronavirus) had affected apprentices differently between economic sectors. Managers explained how in healthcare, many apprentices were placed on a break in learning due to heavy and unpredictable demands on their skills in the workplace.

In business and IT most apprentices continued to study remotely, and managers and apprentices reported that they were able to complete their programmes on time.

Managers confirmed their commitment to offering apprenticeships within the business, health and digital sectors as part of a much broader range of higher level apprenticeships.

Managers and work-based education officers (WBEOs) reported how they had maintained effective communication links with apprentices and employers to enable them to adapt programmes, learning activities and support to meet the needs of apprentices.

Employers confirmed that the staff at the university had been flexible and responsive to the needs of their apprentices. Managers encouraged apprentices to continue learning, even if they were furloughed. They reported that the majority of apprentices had given positive feedback about the level of support they had received during the period from March to September.

Axia, the subcontractor for functional skills, had only been appointed in March. The subcontractor's managers explained how they had established apprentices' employment status and academic starting points. They described how they taught functional skills online and how it had been challenging to make the first contact with apprentices. The situation had now improved, and some apprentices had achieved their functional skills qualifications.

Since late August and early September, managers had encouraged a return to face-to-face teaching in some aspects of the curriculum. This was seen as important for some skill development and application, and group-based tasks.

The link governor described how he was regularly kept informed through regular meetings and management reports. He told inspectors about the challenges and positive developments that had arisen during the period from March.

**What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of learners?**

Middle managers described how they had reviewed and put in place changes to teaching plans, assessment and examinations. These changes were communicated to WBEOs through weekly online meetings. WBEOs communicated the changes to apprentices.

For those apprentices in network engineering, WBEOs already delivered most of the learning online. Staff in healthcare made significant adaptations to learning materials and teaching approaches to support online delivery.

In a business relationship module, staff changed one of the assessments to comprise a professional discussion and presentation, where apprentices could demonstrate their digital capability and competence.

WBEOs reported how their online teaching skills have improved through training and peer support. For example, the use of virtual rooms for small-group work in business.

Staff have reviewed their approaches to teaching practical skills. In some cases, staff have developed virtual simulations. WBEOs have developed these in networking for IT network apprentices and clinical situations for nursing practitioners.

Managers reported that they assure themselves of the quality of online teaching by logging into Webinars and providing feedback to WBEOs to support them to improve where needed. They also consider learners' and employers' feedback and review the quality of apprentices' assessments.

WBEOs have reviewed apprentices' gaps in learning. Although many healthcare apprentices have improved their clinical skills, WBEOs have identified gaps in their academic writing skills. Staff have provided additional support.

Some healthcare apprentices have revised their careers aims in the light of their experiences during the pandemic and are aspiring to become registered nurses; others are applying for degree-level programmes. The central careers advice and guidance team supported an unemployed apprentice to find an alternative employer. Apprentices who want to move from level 5 to a degree programme receive relevant information.

### **How are leaders ensuring that learners are safe and well informed about potential risks, including from online sources?**

Leaders reported that they had started reviewing the risks associated with the pandemic in February.

Staff reported that they maintained contact with apprentices, including those who were furloughed or on a break in learning throughout the period.

Healthcare apprentices had access to a dedicated mental health and well-being service developed by Staffordshire University in partnership with the NHS and Keele University.

Leaders stated that they had taken the opportunity to remove barriers to mental health support by placing it online and extending working hours.

Leaders and staff worked together to determine safe classroom practices when working remotely. This included the use of cameras, how to contribute to sessions and protocols when completing activities.

Apprentices reported that they felt safe working in group-based sessions online. They knew who to contact with any safeguarding concerns. They said that they felt safe when returning to face-to-face sessions at the university and at work.

Apprentices had not reported any safeguarding issues during the period.

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