

# Buckinghamshire New University

Interim visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 133823

**Name of lead inspector:** Peter Cox HMI

**Visit date(s):** 5–6 November 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 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. Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we made this visit remotely to reduce pressure on the provider.

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

Buckinghamshire New University is a higher and further education university. The university provides level 4 and level 5 apprenticeships in nursing associate, healthcare assistant practitioner and associate project manager standards. At the time of the interim visit, there were 345 apprentices, of which the vast majority were working within the National Health Service (NHS). The university also offers the level 3 foundation diploma in art and design. There were 30 learners on the foundation diploma. There were no apprentices or learners in receipt of high needs funding.

### **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?**

Leaders and managers told us about their commitment to high-quality and ambitious learning, and their desire to minimise disruption caused by the pandemic. They spoke with pride about how they worked with staff to review the curriculum carefully and make appropriate changes for remote learning. Staff spoke positively about the additional training which gave them confidence in teaching online. They told us they feel secure in reverting to remote learning if necessary.

Staff spoke about the changes they have made to the curriculum as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. For example, staff told inspectors how they now taught additional topics such as infection control. They described how they changed the order of learning so apprentices developed the essential practical skills needed to work within the NHS during the pandemic. Staff described how they regularly assess

learners' understanding, knowledge and well-being to check for gaps, identify concerns and intervene quickly.

Apprentices and learners now learn through a combination of face-to-face and online teaching. Leaders described how they have adapted information and guidance given to new and returning learners to keep them safe and minimise disruption to learning.

Leaders and managers recognise the significant impact of the pandemic on the mental health of learners and apprentices. They are especially concerned for apprentices within the NHS and black and minority ethnic groups. Leaders described the pastoral services put in place to support learners, and particularly those within the NHS and minority ethnic groups. They explained about help that was available, such as a mental health first-aid course.

Leaders and managers described how they have worked with award organisations, health organisations and employers so that disruption to learning is minimised. The employers and staff at subcontractors that inspectors spoke with appreciated the close links with university staff. Employers spoke about how staff helped nursing apprentices to stay in learning despite the pandemic.

### **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?**

Leaders and managers described their commitment to high-quality teaching. They explained how they helped staff, apprentices and learners with the move to online teaching. Leaders were pleased with the positive feedback from staff and learners about their experiences of online teaching.

Leaders talked about the changes they had made to the management of their apprenticeship programmes. They explained how the pandemic made them make these changes more swiftly and how they felt that this had given staff a stronger ownership and better oversight of apprenticeship programmes

Leaders and managers described how they oversaw the quality of online teaching. They talked about the careful planning and monitoring of changes to the curriculum. For example, staff on nursing courses explained how they had linked online lessons to the COVID-19 environments within which many apprentices were working.

Leaders made sure that apprentices and learners had the equipment and software they needed to access online teaching. Leaders and staff spoke about the benefits of online lessons. For example, they explained how they had successfully changed to a patient-safety module so that it could be taught online. Learners studying art and design exhibited their coursework virtually instead of physically. Staff spoke about how students with particular needs were supported. For example, deaf learners had interpreters for all online learning sessions. Staff felt that careers advice and guidance for learners had not been affected by the pandemic. Staff were

pleased with the enthusiasm and high attendance of almost all learners for online learning activities.

Staff recognised apprentices' concerns about meeting the requirements of their placements due to increased work commitments as a result of the pandemic. Apprentices appreciated the extra time they received to complete their work in these circumstances.

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

Leaders and managers are proud of the culture of safeguarding within the university. Staff, apprentices and learners welcomed training on topics such as online safety, gambling and domestic abuse. Leaders told inspectors about their beneficial relationships with external safeguarding agencies.

Leaders and teaching staff explained how they helped to keep apprentices and learners safe throughout the lockdown. They described the additional mental health support in place for apprentices working within the NHS. Staff spoke with vulnerable learners regularly to monitor their well-being. Managers explained the additional activities that aided the well-being of staff during the period of COVID-19 restrictions, such as online fitness classes, quizzes and other social events.

Leaders and managers described the additional safety measures they had put in place to allow for safe return to the university. They explained how they used individual risk assessments to inform the support needs of vulnerable learners. The small number of staff, apprentices and learners that inspectors spoke with feel safe within the university.

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