

University of Suffolk

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	146206
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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, and higher education 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 students.

Information about the provider

The University of Suffolk was granted university status in August 2016. The main site is in Ipswich, with additional delivery of higher education through further education colleges located in Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth (East Coast College), Bury St Edmunds (West Suffolk College) and Suffolk New College in Ipswich.

At the time of the visit, there were 193 apprentices on the level 4 and level 5 nursing associate and healthcare assistant practitioner higher apprenticeships. The University of Suffolk has continued to develop its partnerships with the healthcare trusts to expand foundation degree apprenticeships. These programmes provide development opportunities for apprentices to enter other nursing degree programmes.

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 say the curriculum for apprentices has largely remained unchanged. When the COVID-19 restrictions were announced, some apprentices were initially put on a short break in learning for up to four weeks. Leaders made a strategic decision to move teaching for the apprentices online as part of a whole institution response to the pandemic. Leaders are proud that lecturers were able to respond so quickly to create appropriate resources on their virtual learning environment (VLE) 'Brightspace'. This has resulted in little disruption to the apprenticeship programme.

Leaders established two working groups to sustain the curriculum. The academic planning group was responsible for the oversight of learning, teaching and assessment changes. The recovery planning group regularly reviewed the logistics of returning to campus, including health and safety arrangements for apprentices.

Leaders say they have been flexible in extending assignment deadlines and reviewing extenuating circumstances so that apprentices were not disadvantaged by the COVID-19 restrictions. They feel that online learning and remote working will become part of the established manner of learning at the university. Leaders ensure that staff are only on the campus if they need to offer limited face-to-face teaching. They feel assured that lecturers have become more confident with using the VLE technology and are now offering high-quality provision online. Leaders say they are therefore fully prepared and equipped for any future local restrictions.

Employers report that apprentices have benefited from working in a clinical setting to develop their practical core skills. The university teaching team has worked closely with employers to deliver specialist skills training at the hospital simulation centres. Employers welcome the use of Microsoft Teams to complete reviews and discuss the academic and well-being needs of apprentices.

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 report that they regularly review and monitor the quality of the training and the knowledge and skills development of apprentices. They keep in regular communication with employers to update them about any necessary changes to the learning programme. They continue to use established forums and committees to discuss and evaluate how the curriculum meets the apprentices' needs. These include academic committee meetings, apprenticeship operational group meetings with employers, and consortium meetings with Health Education England. Leaders and managers are devising further strategies on how to track and evaluate the effective participation of apprentices.

Leaders and managers work closely with lecturers and apprentices to overcome potential barriers in online learning. They provide regular one-to-one support to lecturers to help them design learning content that is relevant to the online delivery model. Leaders and managers provide specialist information technology equipment, including laptops, to staff where they may not have access to the right technology or have poor internet connection in a rural area like Suffolk. Students have access to a support fund to apply for help towards the cost of technology equipment.

Lecturers express how it has been challenging to create high-quality online resources and move lectures to virtual classrooms so quickly. They value the digital training and support that leaders have provided. Lecturers have been able to change assessment methods to meet the needs of the apprentices and to support online methods of learning. For example, they have replaced face-to-face exams with online timed constraint assessments and assignments. Lecturers feel that despite the initial challenges of moving to online teaching, most apprentices have now settled into this more flexible type of study. Apprentices benefit from being able to access the

recording of live lessons in their own time to build their knowledge and skills without the need to travel to university.

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

Leaders have created additional safeguarding sections on their website with information for all stakeholders, including a dedicated frequently asked questions section for apprentices and their employers. They have updated their online safety training material for staff and apprentices.

Apprentices say they receive regular information from the university about how to keep themselves safe. They have completed online safety training on 'Brightspace'. Apprentices are aware of wider safety issues such as how to get support for their well-being, staying safe online and access arrangements to university buildings such as the library if required.

Lecturers report that they check the mental and physical well-being of their apprentices on a regular basis during reviews and discussions with employers. If apprentices have any issues at work which relate to their safety, university staff work closely with their employers to resolve them quickly.

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