Sheffield Hallam University

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	133871
Name of lead inspector:	Jonny Wright, HMI
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Type of provider:	Higher education institution
Address:	City Campus Owen Building Howard Street Sheffield S1 1WB

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 students and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

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

In 2015, leaders at the university introduced a level 4 engineering apprenticeship framework, and in 2017 a level 5 operational departmental manager standards-based apprenticeship. In January 2020, they started to deliver level 4 standards-based programmes in construction. The university works with Derby College, The Sheffield College and JCB Academy as subcontractors to deliver some of the technical training. At the time of the visit, there were three apprentices on the level 4 engineering apprenticeship framework, 48 apprentices on the level 4 construction programmes, and seven apprentices on the level 5 operational departmental manager programme.

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 stated that their greatest challenge at the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions had been to move to online learning for apprentices. They put in place a working group to manage the process of setting up online learning that fit around apprentices' job roles. Prior to the end of the initial period of restrictions, they began planning for apprentices to return to face-to-face teaching. Apprentices began attending sessions at the university in September 2020.

Some apprentices with caring responsibilities find online learning particularly challenging due to their commitments outside work. Managers support apprentices to access teaching sessions by recording all lectures, which has enabled apprentices to catch up at times that are convenient for them.

Leaders and managers described how they worked closely with employers to modify programmes to meet apprentices' needs. Managers looked at apprentices' job roles and discussed with employers the best methods for learning, including online, for each apprentice. Employers value the online teaching that apprentices receive. They

consider that the restrictions caused by the pandemic have not resulted in apprentices having significant gaps in their knowledge and skills, including those apprentices who have been furloughed.

Leaders recognise that there has been a negative impact on the well-being of staff as a result of the pandemic. They ensure that staff are able to access support to maintain their well-being and reduce their anxiety about the pandemic.

Leaders believe that they have strengthened their relationship with subcontracting partners to provide apprenticeships that support employers' requirements and to plan for economic recovery. They work collaboratively with the local further education college to provide opportunities for students at the college to progress onto apprenticeships at the university.

Careers staff have supported apprentices who have been furloughed to maintain their engagement on their programmes. They have helped apprentices at risk of redundancy, following furlough, to gain alternative employment.

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?

Staff believe that apprentices are making the progress expected of them, despite the impact of the pandemic and the introduction of remote teaching. They frequently review the progress that apprentices make towards completing their programmes. Staff state that the most recent review demonstrates that apprentices continued to make progress during the period of COVID-19 restrictions and that most apprentices are on track to complete their programme on time.

Leaders and managers support teaching staff to develop their digital skills and confidence when teaching remotely. Teachers have worked collaboratively with their peer colleagues to identify and share good practice in online teaching. They have been creative in the use of resources for teaching, such as developing a 'lab in the box' with laboratory equipment that engineering apprentices can use at home while participating in online learning.

Apprentices receive 'web-etiquette' support to develop the skills that they need to participate appropriately in online learning. Staff also advise apprentices on how they can protect themselves when using online services in their personal lives, such as online banking.

Managers and teachers modified the curriculum to enable apprentices to continue their programmes during the COVID-19 restrictions. They changed the sequencing of the curriculum to allow practical course elements to come later in the programme. Apprentices have had limited access to training resources in the university as a consequence of social distancing.

Teachers have adapted their approach to assessment so that apprentices are able to express and demonstrate their knowledge in different and innovative ways. Apprentices in construction are encouraged to produce digital posters instead of a report.

Teachers have adapted the way that they measure apprentices' participation in remotely delivered lectures to ensure that apprentices are engaging actively. They use techniques such as live questions, activities that require verbal feedback, and breakout rooms for discussions.

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

Leaders have worked closely with local partners, including trade unions, to carry out risk assessments at the university to enable them to protect staff and apprentices from the risk of COVID-19 infection. They put in place safe operating procedures including maintaining social distance, temperature checks, hygiene checks and wearing face coverings, and they have set up a university-based 'track and trace' system.

Staff use progress reviews to support apprentices' well-being. They identify concerns, advise apprentices on how to stay safe online, and discuss safeguarding issues in the context of apprentices' job roles.

Apprentices feel safe. They know who to speak to at work and at the university if they have any safeguarding concerns.

Leaders are members of a local strategic group, the multi-agency 'Sheffield Prevent Gold Group', and the 'Sheffield Prevent Group' that reports into it. They share with staff and apprentices information that they receive from this group about safeguarding risks arising from the pandemic, including online radicalisation, phishing and misinformation related to COVID-19.