

Inspection of University of Chester

Inspection dates: 17–20 May 2022

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education	Requires improvement
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Requires improvement
Apprenticeships	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

The University of Chester is a higher education institution in Cheshire. It provides a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in various sectors. Apprentices make up around 4% of the university's student population. The apprenticeship provision operates across multiple sites in the city of Chester and has university centres in Warrington and Shrewsbury. Apprenticeship provision is offered in four faculties within the university. They are the faculties of science and engineering, business and management, social sciences, and health and social care. The university subcontracts to two subcontractors. These include the Cheshire Police and Crime Commissioner, which co-deliver the level 6 police constable degree apprenticeship, and Reaseheath College, which provides a small amount of training in functional skills English and mathematics.

At the time of the inspection, there were 561 apprentices enrolled on apprenticeship standards. Most apprentices study at level 6, with the higher enrolments in police constable, chartered manager and social worker. The remainder study on registered nurse and science industry process/plant engineer. Around 110 apprentices study the level 5 nursing associate and healthcare assistant practitioner apprenticeships. At level 7, there were around 123 apprentices on senior leader and four on advanced clinical practitioner.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Apprentices demonstrate positive attitudes to learning. They are enthusiastic and motivated to learn. They routinely demonstrate the behaviours and attitudes they need to be successful in the workplace. As a result, a few apprentices have secured additional responsibilities and promotions at work.

Apprentices value highly the support they receive from staff. They told us this support has been invaluable during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Learner mentors check apprentices' well-being during reviews and signpost them to the university's student support services. Apprentices say this has supported them in the workplace and helped them to remain on their apprenticeship.

Apprentices gain confidence and improve their communication skills as a result of their apprenticeship programmes. Management apprentices learn about breathing techniques and appropriate posture when they are speaking publicly. Nursing apprentices carry out job-specific role play with actors. This helps them learn how to communicate appropriately with patients.

Apprentices feel safe and know how to keep themselves safe. They learn how to recognise signs that peers or patients may be at risk of abuse. Apprentices know how to report these concerns and provide appropriate support.

A few apprentices receive effective careers advice and guidance. Nursing apprentices attend careers festivals and receive support in preparing for interviews. However, apprentices in the faculty of business and management do not receive ongoing careers advice and guidance. They are not given sufficient information on their next steps.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders have a clear rationale for the apprenticeships they offer. They work effectively with NHS trusts and local councils to identify and meet skills needs. This enables the university to provide apprenticeships that meet future skills needs in the local area, such as medicine, social work and environmental/sustainability skills.

The previous leadership team was too slow to resolve significant weaknesses in the quality of education for apprentices. Many of the weaknesses identified at the previous monitoring visit still remain. The quality of education that apprentices receive is inconsistent across the university, with faculties working in isolation. Leaders do not have a clear enough oversight of the progress apprentices make. As a result, leaders cannot be assured that apprentices are on target to achieve. Consequently, most of the senior leader apprentices have not completed their apprenticeship within the planned time. The current leadership team has put in place actions to improve the quality of education, but it is too early to assess any measurable impact.

Leaders do not ensure that staff on management and police constable apprenticeships identify what apprentices already know and can do at the start of their apprenticeship. All apprentices follow the same programme regardless of previous knowledge and experience.

Most learner mentors do not carry out effective reviews of apprentices' progress. They do not ensure that employers are aware of the progress their apprentices make. Staff do not set challenging targets. Consequently, most apprentices do not make the progress of which they are capable. Conversely, staff on the nursing apprenticeships identify what apprentices know and can do at the start of their apprenticeship. They carry out effective reviews with apprentices and mentors in the workplace. Nursing apprentices swiftly develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours as a result of their apprenticeship.

Leaders plan training to enable apprentices to incrementally build their knowledge, skills and behaviours. Management apprentices learn about the organisation and its environment before moving on to more challenging topics, such as finance for non-financial managers. They develop a greater understanding of finance and budgets and apply this well when writing strategic business plans.

Apprentices use their new knowledge effectively in the workplace. Nursing apprentices learn about anatomy and physiology of the body and how to apply this to identify clinical conditions. They correctly identify respiratory conditions in patients and provide the appropriate care.

Staff on nursing and social work apprentices coordinate on- and off-the-job training well. Apprentices practise what they learn in the workplace regularly. As a result, they work increasingly independently and support patients and clients' needs effectively. However, for management and the police constable apprenticeships leaders do not consistently ensure that employers are sufficiently involved in the planning of on- and off-the-job training. They do not ensure that apprentices have the opportunity to practise skills learned swiftly in the workplace. As a result, these apprentices do not refine their skills as quickly as they could.

Staff provide useful support for apprentices. They put in place appropriate support plans for apprentices that need extra help, for example to develop apprentices' academic writing skills or concerns with their mental health and well-being. Apprentices overcome barriers to learning and make sustained progress on their apprenticeship programme.

Staff do not adequately prepare management apprentices for their final assessments. Apprentices and employers are not sufficiently informed about the assessment process. As a result, too many apprentices make slow progress and do not complete their apprenticeships.

Leaders have been too slow to put in place support for apprentices to complete their functional skills in English and mathematics. Apprentices have not had access to taught sessions, remote learning or the opportunity to sit their examinations.

Leaders have very recently entered into a subcontracting arrangement with a provider to teach functional skills. Plans are now in place to prioritise those apprentices that are beyond their planned end date.

Leaders ensure that lecturers are appropriately qualified with relevant industry experience to teach their subjects. They benefit from regular training to inform their teaching. For example, nursing lecturers learn about cognitive behaviour, which they use to develop apprentices' understanding of relationship issues and strategies to intervene. Apprentices are able to skilfully manage conflict in the workplace.

Leaders have clear oversight of their subcontracted provision. They hold regular meetings and carry out peer reviews. Leaders support subcontractor staff to complete further training to improve their teaching skills.

Governors are suitably experienced and qualified to carry out their roles. They are aware of the strengths of the apprenticeship provision and are rightly proud of the strategic vision and intent of the programmes. However, they do not receive sufficiently detailed reports to enable them to provide effective challenge on the quality of education.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The designated safeguarding lead and deputies are appropriately trained and qualified to carry out their roles. All staff carry out mandatory online safeguarding and 'Prevent' duty training. Staff who work with apprentices in particularly high-risk areas, such as nursing and policing, complete additional safeguarding training at level 3.

Leaders deal with safeguarding referrals and welfare concerns effectively. They accurately record and follow up concerns swiftly. Leaders analyse trends in safeguarding referrals and provide additional training for staff and apprentices. For example, as a result of an increase in referrals for domestic violence, additional training has been provided on spotting the signs and dealing with domestic violence.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders should identify what apprentices already know and can do at the start of their programme and use this information to ensure that all apprentices achieve their potential and develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours on their apprenticeship.
- Leaders should ensure that learner mentors and employers are routinely involved in the planning of on- and-off-the-job training and reviews of their apprentices to support apprentices to make the progress of which they are capable.
- Leaders should improve the careers information, advice and guidance that apprentices receive, particularly those in the faculty of business and

management, so they are aware of further study and career options available to them.

- Leaders should continue to monitor the delivery of functional skills to ensure that all apprentices have access to appropriate training and support so that they successfully achieve these qualifications.
- Leaders should ensure that staff prepare apprentices for their final assessments and know how to achieve merit and distinction grades, where relevant, so that apprentices complete their apprenticeship.
- Leaders should ensure that they provide accurate and useful reports to governors that include all information relevant to apprenticeships so that governors can provide effective scrutiny and challenge.

Provider details

Unique reference number	133802
Address	Parkgate Road Chester Cheshire CH1 4BJ
Contact number	01244 513455
Website	https://www1.chester.ac.uk/
Vice-Chancellor	Professor Eunice Simmons
Provider type	Higher Education Provider
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	The Police & Crime Commissioner for Cheshire and the Chief Constable of Cheshire Reaseheath College

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the pro vice-chancellor (student experience), as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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