

University of Birmingham

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

From October 2018, Ofsted undertook to carry out monitoring visits to all newly directly funded providers of apprenticeship training provision which began to be funded from April 2017 or after by the Education and Skills Funding Agency and/or the apprenticeship levy. This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of those arrangements and as outlined in the 'Further education and skills inspection handbook', especially the sections entitled 'Monitoring visits' and 'Monitoring visits to providers that are newly directly publicly funded'. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

The University of Birmingham is a large higher education institution that provides a broad range of undergraduate and postgraduate apprenticeship programmes across a variety of academic and vocational specialisms. The university started delivering apprenticeships in September 2018. At the time of the visit, there were 748 apprentices in learning. The largest number of enrolments are on the level 7 senior leader and the level 6 digital and technology solutions professional apprenticeships. Other apprenticeships include level 7 apprenticeships in advanced clinical practitioner, rail and rail systems principal engineer and geotechnical engineer. A very small number of apprentices study at levels 3 and 5 in team leader and departmental manager.

The university provides short, intensive employability-related training to adult learners who reside in and around the Birmingham conurbation through a contract directly funded by the West Midlands Combined Authority. At the time of the visit, 99 adult learners were attending four sector-specific skills boot camps. Around three quarters were enrolled on digital-related skills courses in coding, data analytics and applied cyber security. In addition, a small minority study the media-related skills boot camp in drama and scripted television.

Themes

How much progress have leaders made in ensuring that the provider is meeting all the requirements of successful apprenticeship provision and in designing and delivering relevant adult learning provision that has a clearly defined purpose?

Reasonable progress

Senior leaders have developed a clear vision and ambitious curriculum strategy that is closely aligned to key regional and national priorities. Leaders have established a clear curriculum intent that supports adults to upskill and progress their respective careers and apprentices to acquire and develop skills, knowledge and behaviours

linked to strategically important employment sectors, including digital, clinical sciences, transportation, and leadership.

Leaders, with the active support of employers and regional partners, carefully plan the apprenticeship and adult learning provision to meet identified skills needs and to widen participation, extend social mobility and to reflect the diversity of the locality where the university is based.

Staff involved in teaching to both apprentices and adult learners are highly skilled practitioners in their respective fields. They successfully draw upon their teaching and academic experience to inform their planning and sequencing of learning. Tutors benefit from access to a wide range of professional development activities to maintain their registration with professional bodies, support their professional practice and to extend their academic research. They routinely incorporate this knowledge and these skills into their teaching for the benefit of apprentices and adult learners.

Leaders have invested significantly in the development of their apprenticeship and adult learning provision, building upon areas of established vocational and academic expertise across the university. For example, investment has been made in high-quality learning resources and facilities that enable apprentices and adult learners to practise and develop the academic rigour associated with higher level study and extend their occupational skills, knowledge and behaviours.

Leaders and managers suitably focus on the quality of teaching and learning and have implemented appropriately detailed quality assurance practices at every level of the institution. However, while leaders are fully conversant with the strengths, weaknesses and risks associated with their apprenticeship provision, judgements about the effectiveness of the adult learning curriculum are not considered as part of the self-assessment.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that apprentices benefit from high-quality training that leads to positive outcomes for apprentices? Reasonable progress

Academic leaders have developed a broad and responsive apprenticeship curriculum that meet the needs of employers. Where relevant, tutors have adapted the apprenticeship curriculum to incorporate sector-specific pathways to provide maximum flexibility. On the level 7 senior leader apprenticeship, apprentices working within different employment sectors benefit from access to a range of defined learning pathways within the qualification that best meets their needs.

Apprentices benefit from detailed initial advice and guidance. On the level 6 digital and technology solutions apprenticeship, the university and employers jointly interview and assess applicants. Most apprentices have a precise understanding of

the academic expectations and study demands associated with their course, the training that they will undertake and the assessments that they will need to complete.

Subject leads and course tutors carefully plan the apprenticeship curriculum so that it fits well with the expectations and demands of employers, workplace commitments of their employees and incorporates a range of in-person and online delivery formats. Employers are very supportive of the flexibility of how apprenticeships are provided and ensure that their employees receive protected time to learn.

Apprentices enjoy and value greatly the training that they receive, both at the university and in the workplace. They are committed to developing their careers and understand how their apprenticeship will help them to achieve their ambitions.

Teaching staff are well qualified, skilfully utilising their academic insight and vocational expertise to sequence the order in which topics are going to be taught, both to embed essential learning, reinforcing key concepts, and to integrate learning activities that motivate and extend apprentices' interest. Apprentices value this approach, as it enables them to quickly develop a secure understanding of the relevance of theory-to-workplace practice.

Tutors' tracking of apprentices' progress from their starting points is underdeveloped, and too few apprentices receive timely feedback on marked work.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that learners benefit from high-quality adult education that prepares them well for their intended job role, career aims and/or personal goals? Reasonable progress

Leaders ensure that adult learners benefit from a curriculum that is well sequenced and incorporates a range of relevant sector-specific employability pathways, including digital and media, that meet their needs and interests well.

Tutors use the results of initial and continuing assessment well to develop suitably personalised programmes for learners that support them to make good progress. Training coaches use their extensive knowledge and industry expertise well to plan relevant and challenging learning.

Learners speak positively about their learning experience, such as working collaboratively to develop and practise new skills and gain new knowledge that helps to improve their confidence and self-esteem. For example, on the coding course, they learn how to use programming language such as HTML, CSS and Java Script that they incorporate into browsers for their website project, which they then showcase to prospective employers.

Learners benefit from inclusive learning environments in which they feel safe to answer questions and express their opinions. They support each other very well when working in groups. For example, on the drama and scripted television course, learners create 'call sheets' outlining different roles for the production, such as technical supervisor, director and director of photography. These role plays prepare them well for relevant placement in the industry and beyond.

Tutors' feedback to learners is precise and detailed, making clear what they need to do to remain on target and/or to improve. Learners appreciate the level of support that they receive from their tutors and coaches, helping them to become confident and independent and ready to progress to their next step in their career.

The majority of learners make good progress and complete their course, and a high proportion gain employment. However, retention on the coding course is not yet effective, and tutors on the drama and scripted television course do not systematically record students' attendance. Leaders have suitable action plans in place to address these aspects.

How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that effective safeguarding arrangements are in place? Reasonable progress

Leaders place a high priority on ensuring the safety and welfare of apprentices and adult learners. Designated personnel with oversight for safeguarding are suitably trained and experienced. Staff who directly work with apprentices and adult learners benefit from targeted training in safeguarding and 'Prevent' duty. Additionally, they are vigilant to the signs that indicate an individual may need protection.

Leaders ensure that safeguarding policies reflect regional and national priorities. Procedures for reporting incidents to external agencies, such as the police and local safeguarding boards, are well understood and closely followed by the safeguarding team.

Safeguarding leads make effective use of close and beneficial links with a wide range of external agencies to inform the institution's understanding of local risks and vulnerabilities. However, a few learners and apprentices have yet to develop fluency in being able to articulate their awareness of how to keep themselves safe from a range of potential risks.

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