

Inspection of United Church Schools Trust

Inspection dates: 31 January to 2 February 2024

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

Information about this provider

United Church Schools Trust (UCST) is a charity providing apprenticeship training on behalf of United Learning. United Learning is a large trust with over 100 schools across all phases in the state and independent sector. UCST began teaching apprentices in March 2021.

At the time of the inspection, there were 95 apprentices studying level 3 standards-based apprenticeships. Forty-one apprentices study teaching assistant (TA) apprenticeships, 32 study early years educator (EYE) programmes, and 22 study human resources (HR) support apprenticeships. Fewer than five apprentices are under 19 years old. Approximately half the apprentices are employed by schools within the trust. Approximately two-thirds of apprentices study functional skills mathematics and English as part of their apprenticeship.

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

Apprentices thoroughly enjoy their training and most attend well. They quickly form friendships and supportive learning groups with their peers. When online, apprentices work together in breakout rooms, they are respectful of each other and value each other's opinions and experiences. For example, EYE apprentices share ideas about the best use of calming zones. As their training progresses, apprentices become confident communicators. They present information clearly to their peers.

Apprentices quickly develop new skills and knowledge, and many take on additional responsibilities at work. TA apprentices rapidly assume responsibilities for developing education, health and care plans, and working with families to help improve their children's attendance at school. Apprentices, including those with additional learning needs, make good progress while on their programmes. Nearly all go on to achieve their qualifications.

Too few apprentices are aware of, or take part in, extra-curricular activities or experiences beyond their main programme of study. Because of this, apprentices do not benefit from opportunities to pursue their wider talents and interests.

Apprentices receive industry-related careers advice from their programme leads, who highlight career paths within the school sector. HR apprentices discuss the different finance roles within a large school trust and the role of the chief finance officer. However, leaders do not inform apprentices about further training opportunities available to them when they complete their courses.

Apprentices feel safe, including when working online. They know who to contact if they have any concerns. Through the guidance that programme leads and leaders give as part of the training, apprentices understand how to stay safe and keep mentally healthy. Mental health first aiders provide advice to apprentices about maintaining good mental health and healthy lifestyles if they need it.

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

Since the new provider monitoring visit, leaders have worked effectively to continue to improve the experience and training that apprentices receive. Senior leaders have increased their leadership capacity to work more closely with employers. They make sure that employers provide apprentices with time at work to complete their studies and that they know about the final assessment part of the apprenticeship.

Leaders and governors have a clear reason for the training they offer. They aim to professionalise school support roles that lead to sustainable careers within the sector. They meet frequently with school leaders to make sure that their training meets the national and local skills shortages in schools. Employers value the opportunities to discuss training needs and programme content, and nearly all would recommend them to another school.

Leaders know their areas of strength and areas that they need to improve. They use a range of quality assurance processes effectively to monitor and improve the apprentice experience. Leaders visit lessons, analyse data and review employer and apprentice feedback. Leaders act swiftly when they identify areas of concern. For example, they have improved their recruitment process and initial guidance for new apprentices. Because of this, the number of apprentices who remain on and complete their apprenticeships is now high.

Programme leads are industry experts and suitably qualified. They use their sector knowledge well to plan and teach the curriculum effectively. HR programme leads teach apprentices recruitment processes before moving on to more challenging topics such as performance-related pay. EYE programme leads teach content relevant to the time of the academic year. They teach apprentices about successful transition before the summer break. Apprentices can then practise and apply their new knowledge and skills quickly in the workplace.

Programme leads plan effective activities and use resources well to help apprentices recall what they learn. They plan projects, assignments and presentations to check the progress that apprentices make effectively. Apprentices enjoy webinars and face-to-face sessions, which frequently include a range of industry expert speakers. For example, TA apprentices benefit from presentations from special educational needs experts who share good practice and policy updates.

Leaders make sure that apprentices receive their full entitlement to off-the-job training and attend effective progress reviews with their programme leaders and mentors. Apprentices appreciate these reviews because they give them time to reflect on the skills they are developing and how they use them in their work. For example, EYE apprentices discuss how they try to minimise the spread of infection by using wipe-clean clock faces when teaching children how to tell the time. Mentors play a key part in the reviews. They encourage their apprentices to share their experiences and help them to plan meaningful targets to work towards for their next review.

Leaders have taken effective actions to improve the teaching of functional skills in English. Apprentices benefit from weekly one-to-one sessions and examination preparation techniques. Apprentices progress quickly and most pass their English examinations on their first attempt. However, leaders have been too slow to improve the number of apprentices who pass their mathematics examinations on their first attempt. In a few cases, this causes delays to apprentices completing their qualifications.

Leaders provide a good range of continuous professional development opportunities for staff. Staff attend training on the apprenticeship requirements, preparing apprentices for their final assessment, and the use of effective assessment methods. Programme leads value the training and support they receive, which makes them more effective in their roles.

Governors have expertise in finance, safeguarding and education, which they use well to support leaders. Governors support leaders with policy development and advice about skills shortages within the school sector. Senior leaders keep governors well informed about their strengths and areas for improvement. Governors provide effective support and challenge to leaders on areas such as retention and overall outcomes of apprentices.

Leaders and managers are considerate of the workload and well-being of staff. Staff can access a mental health hub which provides links to mental health first aiders and free counselling. Staff share their own lived experiences at monthly well-being webinars. For example, staff members talk about their mental health problems, and how they have adapted their work-life balance to manage their diagnosis. Staff appreciate the support they receive. They enjoy their work, and they feel proud to work for the provider.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Make sure that apprentices are aware of, and take part in, personal development opportunities.
- Improve the quality of functional skills in mathematics teaching so that more apprentices achieve their qualifications on their first attempt and apprentices achieve their apprenticeships in a timely manner.
- Make sure that apprentices have access to high-quality impartial careers advice and guidance, including information about further and higher education.

Provider details

Unique reference number	2691322
Address	Worldwide House Peterborough PE3 6SB
Contact number	07880 005 146
Website	apprentice.unitedlearning.org.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Sir Jon Coles
Provider type	Independent learning provider
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the quality and compliance manager, 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

Paul Manning, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Julia Stevens	Ofsted Inspector
David Baber	Ofsted Inspector

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