

**Universities and Ofsted –
learnings from recent
apprenticeship inspections**
January 2022 – December 2023





The last two years have seen the entry of many new providers into the market, after a quieter period during the Covid-19 crisis. In this eBook, we explore insights from the 70 university apprenticeship inspection reports that have been published by Ofsted between January 2022 and December 2023.

Ofsted has been much in the news with announcements around single grade judgements, changes to post-inspection process and further training of inspectors. And, whilst university reports compare very favourably in terms of grading outcomes to apprenticeship sector provider reports as a whole, there is a growing feeling in a university sector where the historic and prevailing culture is one of quality self-governance, that it would be a mistake to be driven by fear of audit judgements. Instead, many feel that each university should simply focus on developing long-term strategies to provide excellent curriculum, teaching, skills development and support for and with apprentices and employers.

Notwithstanding these understandable sentiments and concerns, there is certainly great value in reflecting upon the many recently published reports. On behalf of Aptem, Steve Dewhurst, Independent Higher Education Consultant, has curated an analysis and summary of recurring issues and concerns, as well as what is now a wealth of good or outstanding practice identified by Ofsted in university provider reports. In this summary, he has also drawn some conclusions around common themes in five key areas that Ofsted has been focusing upon.

There are five key areas of interest that Ofsted has been focusing on:



Leadership and management



Programme design



Learner suitability and impact



Programme delivery



Safeguarding, welfare and guidance

Leadership and management



Issues identified

For some providers, Ofsted cited that the oversight of measures to assure the quality of apprenticeship provision is not a sufficiently integral part of wider institutional quality assurance processes. As a result, leaders do not routinely identify strengths or weaknesses relating specifically to apprenticeships.

Inspectors noticed that some senior leaders and those responsible for governance do not have robust central visibility of the progress apprentices are making. Managers have different systems for recording aspects of apprentices' progress, such as completion of assignments. However, it was commented that leaders and managers do not track the overall progress that apprentices make for all elements of their programme, and as a consequence, do not have a secure grasp on apprentices who are at risk of not achieving.

Guidance stated that leaders should improve achievement levels of programmes in which too few apprentices stay on programme and achieve their qualifications.

It's also important to ensure that quality assurance leads to effective actions being taken for improvement for progress monitoring, and for the teaching provided by subcontracted training providers.



Outstanding practice identified

Ofsted praises leaders that ensure apprenticeships are recognised across the institution as a core part of the university's academic offer. They have developed robust internal quality assurance processes which, while linked to those of the wider university, have been carefully tailored to ensure that these arrangements meet the needs of apprentices and employers.

Successful leaders have also established a dedicated and impactful governance structure for apprenticeships. Link Governors talk to apprentices and visit lessons to better understand the strengths and areas for improvement. Governors provide robust challenge while supporting senior leaders to make continuous improvement.

Ofsted values leaders and managers that are forensic in their analysis of strengths and areas for development for the qualifications they teach, making timely interventions to improve the quality of education.

There is significant praise for senior leaders that have developed a highly ambitious curriculum to meet the needs of employers and the communities they serve. These leaders plan highly effective training to enable apprentices and students to incrementally build their knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) over time.



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ Focus from universities, their staff and their governors on embracing, integrating and recognising apprenticeships in strategy, governance and across all quality systems and monitoring, specifically tailored to apprenticeship programmes.
- ✓ Using governance to effectively monitor success and action improvements when required.



Programme design



Issues identified

Some institutions were picked up on not having comprehensively mapped all existing and new higher-degree programmes to the relevant apprenticeship standard, so that apprentices can develop the KSBs set out in the standards throughout the programme.

Ofsted recognises the need for leaders to ensure that the curriculum is well planned to enable apprentices to remain in learning and successfully complete their programme in the time originally planned.

Fundamentally, leaders should ensure that they work with employers when apprentices start their programmes so that they plan apprentices' training at work effectively.

Inspectors also flagged that progress reviews involving the apprentice, workplace mentor and work-based learning officers are not always effectively used to help employers to plan relevant and timely workplace activity that allows apprentices to practise what they have learned.



Outstanding practice identified

Inspectors are looking for evidence that academic teams write apprenticeship programmes starting with the KSBs required by the apprenticeship standard, as opposed to starting with degree programme and module learning outcomes.

Where programme design is deemed to be showcasing best practice, teaching staff across all programmes use a range of highly effective teaching strategies to help apprentices embed new knowledge and skills. They recap and revisit theory and practice frequently and encourage apprentices to reflect through discussion with peers and in presentations. Apprentices deepen their knowledge and confidence to work effectively with professionals in their workplace.

In some exemplary cases, leaders and tutors link on- and off-the-job learning extremely effectively. They plan this coherently to enable apprentices to apply the new knowledge they learn at the university quickly in their workplaces. Consequently, apprentices swiftly improve the standard of their performance.



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ Degree apprenticeship programmes that have been designed to fully integrate degree qualifications, KSBs, and professional standards into programmes designed for and in conjunction with employers. Very early on in the development of degree apprenticeships, we heard of concerns from Ofsted that they would simply be “*re-badged degree programmes*”. We now have many examples of good and outstanding practice. Where this is not the case, inspectors are quick to underline deficiencies.
- ✓ The seamless and coherent integration and planning of on-and off-the-job learning and skills practice in both programme design and teaching strategies.

Learner suitability and impact



Issues identified

Some reports stated that leaders must ensure staff take account of apprentices' existing skills and knowledge to ensure that apprentices with more experience of topics in the curriculum are challenged effectively to extend their knowledge further.

They elaborate by stating that too few staff consider apprentices' existing skills and knowledge when planning the curriculum. Apprentices self-assess their existing KSBs against those required by the apprenticeship standard. Too few staff validate these self-assessments to ensure their accuracy. They do not know whether apprentices develop significant new skills and knowledge as a result. Lecturers do not make effective use of the information they collect about the starting points of the apprentices.

Leaders must ensure that the starting points of apprentices in English and mathematics are used by lecturers to inform the planning of teaching and development of these skills throughout apprentices' programmes, to ensure apprentices develop the skills they need to be successful in their next steps.



Outstanding practice identified

Good quality providers demonstrate that they recruit apprentices with integrity. They carefully assess the starting points of apprentices and the needs of the businesses through detailed discussions. This allows lecturers and skills coaches to plan individualised training that meets the needs and goals of apprentices and their employers.

Inspectors are on the lookout for evidence that tutors carry out thorough assessments of apprentices' existing knowledge and skills at the start of their programmes. They believe this is critical to ensure that apprentices have the skills they need to succeed in their chosen career.

Reports praise tutors that use the results of initial and continuing assessment to develop suitably personalised programmes for learners, sufficiently supporting them to make good progress. Exemplary training coaches use their extensive knowledge and industry expertise well to plan relevant and challenging learning.

There is also praise for lecturers that identify and use apprentices' starting points and progress to plan the curriculum. This means apprentices can learn and apply new KSBs at work and achieve their apprenticeship.



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ The effective assessment of an apprentice's starting points and, importantly, how they are used. This reflects Ofsted's emphasis on meeting and building upon the individual needs of learners.
- ✓ Prior learning, skills and experience assessments that are used to ensure that the programme is both suitable and challenging; and tutors, learners and employers that regularly review progress against their starting points with interventions to support and stretch where required.



Programme delivery



Issues identified

Ofsted teams critique leaders that have not ensured apprentices and employers are fully aware of the requirements to succeed in their final assessments. As a result, employers cannot provide support and training to apprentices to prepare for these assessments effectively.

Leaders do not always ensure that employers, line managers and workplace mentors know what their apprentices are learning when they are not at work. This results in a lack of workplace opportunities to apply and deepen their learning.

Staff do not always ensure that apprentices are clear about the progress they are making or their priorities for development. Too often, targets are focused on the completion of tasks rather than identifying the KSBs that apprentices need to learn. Consequently, not all apprentices have clear targets that are focused on developing gaps in their knowledge and skills.

Inspectors flag that lecturers should ensure all apprentices are provided with clear feedback that identifies what they have done well and what they need to do to improve to sustain positive outcomes.



Outstanding practice identified

Some lecturers are praised for using highly effective assessment strategies to help apprentices understand and prepare for their examinations. In such cases, apprentices use this information to develop their technical knowledge and improve their higher thinking and study skills. These lecturers consistently link feedback on the written assignments to the requirements of the final examinations. This helps apprentices to repeatedly practise and improve their examination technique to achieve high grades.

Inspectors recognise where 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.

Reports highlight the importance of tutors effectively reviewing apprentices' progress. Such tutors set specific targets for apprentices to develop their KSBs, and apprentices work well with work-based mentors to plan their workplace training.

They also praise institutions where apprentices receive high-quality on-the-job training that supports them to swiftly develop and practise relevant new KSBs.



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ Inspectors rarely criticise teaching quality or academic expertise in university reports; they do however quite frequently question how tutors support learners to achieve success.
- ✓ A coherent programme of teaching, practice and review that ensures that all parties have a clear understanding of how, when and where learning, skills and assessment will take place, and that monitoring, feedback and targets clearly indicate how their improvement and success can be achieved and sustained.



Safeguarding, welfare and guidance



Issues identified

Some leaders provide appropriate training and information to their apprentices on safeguarding and the risks of radicalisation and extremism. However, reports show that staff do not routinely revisit these topics in sufficient detail. Consequently, too many apprentices cannot recall what they have been taught.

A common area for improvement is that leaders are not doing enough to ensure that apprentices develop and retain their knowledge of key topics in the curriculum. This includes the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism, life in modern Britain and online safety.

Lecturers do not always provide effective and independent careers advice and guidance to apprentices. Learners therefore lack awareness of how the knowledge and skills they gain can further their careers beyond their current jobs.

Inspectors flag that leaders should ensure all apprentices benefit from high-quality careers advice and guidance from the beginning of their apprenticeship, so that they are clearly versed in the full range of next steps available to them on completion of their apprenticeship.



Outstanding practice identified

In exemplary provisions, apprentices demonstrate a deep understanding of safeguarding and safety issues and can apply this to their professional lives appropriately.

Apprentices gain a secure understanding of fundamental British values, relevant to their work and lives. For example, they can identify the signs of radicalisation when carrying out their roles.

Staff at successful providers offer apprentices helpful careers advice and guidance that enables them to consider progression and to think more widely about transferable skills they have developed. These apprentices value the opportunity in teaching sessions to learn from their peers who are employed in other workplace settings.

Inspectors are looking for apprentices that are well prepared for their careers, by learning about different roles and specialisms through their programmes and having access to the breadth of the university careers services.

Ofsted places value on apprentices having high aspirations for their future beyond achievement of their apprenticeship, as well as knowing who and where to go to for support.



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ Core values and careers guidance are common across the education inspection frameworks. Irrespective of the type of provision and maturity of learners, these are heavily scrutinised and are frequently raised by Ofsted for improvement at university audits. Whilst universities are equipped for and provide many services to their students, the evidence would seem to suggest that many find it difficult to apply, embed and evidence this across their degree apprenticeships.
- ✓ It is not enough to point learners towards services and support that is available across the university; rather apprentices are expected to understand safeguarding, Prevent, British values and health & safety, and apply it within the context of their workplace and professional lives. Similarly, in terms of careers, apprentices should be individually advised about how their specific learning and training can lead to opportunities beyond their current role.
- ✓ An introduction to each area of guidance at induction, revisiting each within the programme and reflecting with employers at progress reviews, creating a progressive, effective and compliant process.

How Aptem supports the HE sector

Aptem Apprenticeship is the leading end-to-end apprenticeship delivery system, and is already used by 40% of universities delivering degree apprenticeships, including Anglia Ruskin University, Middlesex University, London South Bank University, University of Nottingham and Aston University. More institutions are coming on board every month.

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