


Universities and Ofsted:
learnings from recent inspections





With Ofsted busy catching up on its Covid-induced backlog, many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are rightly anticipating inspections over the coming months.



It's been less than a year since Ofsted took the reins from the Office for Students for assessing the quality of higher-level apprenticeships. All eyes were on Worcester University when it became the first HEI to have its report published in July 2021. Since then, inspection reports have slowly been filtering through, with mixed outcomes.

So how justified were the concerns of Amanda Spielman, Ofsted Chief Inspector, about level 6 and 7 apprenticeships simply being "repackaged graduate schemes"? What are the inspectors picking up on as we go into a period of more frequent inspections? What can institutions learn from those that have already been examined?

Steve Dewhurst, Independent Higher Education Consultant and HE Product Director at Aptem, has curated an analysis of recent reports, summarising 'good practices' and focus development areas, with a conclusion of what is needed in order to achieve a glowing report.

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

The red flags here are around the sharing of information about learner progress so as to invite scrutiny and challenge from the apprenticeship board and governors. In some cases, the information shared is too little, too late. For example, just high-level metrics around the number of apprentices who complete the degree element.

Inspectors also commented, “Leaders manage the quality of apprenticeships within individual faculties of the university, alongside the wider range of university courses provided. As a result, there is insufficient strategic and operational oversight of the quality of the apprenticeship programme to inform improvements. This results in inconsistency in the quality of apprenticeships and in apprentices’ experience.” The holistic, strategic management of apprenticeships as a provision in their own right is therefore a key area for providers to get right.

Unsurprisingly, inspectors are noticing when leaders and managers lack visibility of workplace application of vocational skills. Fundamental to the premise of an apprenticeship, this is a key area for institutions to focus on.



Outstanding practice

Where leadership is deemed to be showcasing best practice, organisations are showing a “strong commitment to develop and expand apprenticeships alongside their existing programmes”. The overriding message here is about commitment, with the use of phrases such as “invested significantly”, “clear strategy” and “well-established relationships”. There is no short-cut; you need to throw some resource behind apprenticeships to make a success of it.

Ofsted values accountability and scrutiny, and recognises when apprenticeship boards are made up of individuals who are “highly enthusiastic and very experienced”, making reference to the inclusion of pro-vice chancellors as a signal of one particular apprenticeship provision having some serious weight behind it.

There is significant praise for organisations that have set their apprenticeships up centrally, but with a cross-institution focus, with demonstrable consistency across faculties. Standardisation is being achieved with a consistent approach to “how staff collate and manage apprentices’ coursework and performance data and provide feedback to apprentices on their work”.



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ Strong strategic commitment and rationale to development, delivery and growth of apprenticeship provision that meets the higher skills needs of the local economy.
- ✓ Investment in ensuring comprehensive cross-university and vertical quality monitoring that is effective and clear in terms of responsibility, action, consistency and sharing best practice.



Programme design



Issues

Apprenticeships must be intrinsically linked to employer needs, yet a number of institutions are not yet demonstrating that they are developing “a curriculum beyond the degree programme”. Recent reports suggest this is due to a “lack of understanding of the principles and requirements of an apprenticeship”, resulting in sub-standard delivery.

The inspectors are continually looking for evidence that the learning can be applied at work. With regard to assessment, some programme directors are being pulled up on not planning “carefully enough the assessment components of the levels 6 and level 7 apprenticeship programmes, alongside the degree components”. They will of course check with your apprentices that they understand how End Point Assessment (EPA) will take place.



Outstanding practice

When done well, Ofsted is praising “expertly designed curricula that very effectively meet the needs of employers and regional economic priorities”. It’s a clear focus on outcome; not just for the individual apprentice and their career aspirations, but with an eye firmly on the impact on industry productivity. The best reports are coming from universities where Ofsted can see the apprenticeship has opened doors to further study or employment.

Inspectors suggest that employers’ and apprentices’ needs can only really be met through a “flexible approach to the apprenticeship curriculum”. They pull out practical examples: “The current cohorts of apprentices have different and flexible models of off-the-job training at the university. One cohort of apprentices attend university one day per week, while another attends for block weeks.”



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ Apprenticeship degree design that articulates and demonstrates how the programme module delivery maps to and builds the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs).
- ✓ Highly effective qualification delivery that leads to successful achievement of professional qualifications and standards, ultimately leading to high-quality outcomes.
- ✓ Coherent review, monitoring and assessment including End Point Assessment.

Learner suitability and impact



Issues

Again with a sharp focus on the end result, some reports flag a lack of understanding about where the apprentices will go next. What are their aspirations? Where are they heading? Without this consideration and insight, “the suitability of their curriculum to help apprentices to achieve their ambitions” comes into question.

Other challenges crop up around leaders not “routinely using the identified starting points of apprentices correctly to inform apprentices’ learning plans. As a result, too many apprentices repeat learning and do not make progress as swiftly as they should”. The evidence of monthly progress in exchange for funding is a pretty fundamental principle of an apprenticeship that too many providers are currently missing. Where apprentices’ prior learning, qualifications, skills and experience are measured at the start of the learning, “they do not use this information effectively to set individual targets and measure gains in apprentices’ knowledge”. The knock-on effect of this is a decline in the chances of apprentices fulfilling their potential.



Outstanding practice

Exemplary degree apprenticeships make full use of robust assessment of apprentices’ existing knowledge and skills at beginning of the programme. “Employers work with the provider to match the taught elements of the apprenticeship to the knowledge and skills requirements within apprentices’ job roles. This gives apprentices the chance to practise their newly learned knowledge or skills.” Recognition of prior learning comes up as a critical indicator of success, with such providers then able to “develop a learning plan to ensure apprentices develop significant new skills”. Additional Learning Support (ALS) needs are taken seriously at the best performing institutions, with apprenticeship that have additional needs such as dyslexia receiving effective support “through support plans or additional sessions with learning support services”.



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ Through the application and onboarding process organisations should capture, understand and respond to learners' starting points. This includes KSBs, prior work experience and career aspirations.
- ✓ Top performers ensure that the programme will build on starting points, with progress being monitored and targets set where needed through regular reviews.
- ✓ Programmes must be individualised rather than generically delivered for cohorts. They should take into account the learner's strengths and weaknesses which can be recorded to show the distance travelled.



Programme delivery



Issues

Much of the critique comes when an apprenticeship provision fails to record and effectively use information about apprentices' progress and achievements. Without this, inspectors lack faith that adequate progress will be made. "Tutors in different departments use different systems for storing apprentices' work, providing feedback, and monitoring progress. As a result, managers do not have a robust or timely oversight of apprentices' progress." There are also criticisms that "the apprentices' work and progress records contain too few explicit links between theory and apprentices' development of new work-related skills and behaviours".

A critical success factor, which can be lacking it seems, is the tripartite review with the coach, employer and apprentice. High levels of employer and learner engagement are essential ingredients in this, both of which require a long-term strategy and a lot of determination from the provider and coach. While the reviews "should help apprentices to know specifically the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to focus on to do their best", providers shouldn't forget the requirement to explore other topics such as the 'Prevent' duty and safeguarding. "Too often, reviews are cursory and place a disproportionate focus on the completion

of units of qualifications as opposed to the development of the new knowledge, skills and understanding needed in the workplace."

Maths and English capability underpins a successful apprenticeship. Inspectors call out those who don't help learners develop these skills early and quickly enough in the programme, as well as those who are not supported to develop these skills beyond level 2 to help them meet their career aspirations.



Outstanding practice

Once again, inspectors highlight the importance of linking apprentice progress and employer need, with the best reports flagging observations such as "apprentices make excellent progress in improving their skills, knowledge and behaviours and make significant improvements to the quality of their work so that it meets and often exceeds industrial requirements". They credit this to high-quality education, "aligned with effectively planned and well-coordinated on- and off-the-job training" which "helps apprentices to link theory to the tasks that they complete at work and to make an effective contribution to their employers' businesses".

The scrutiny around effectively recording starting points is justified through observations such as: “Most current apprentices are making the progress that is expected in relation to their starting points. Where apprentices have fallen behind, tutors support these apprentices effectively to catch up.”

Of course, none of this exemplary delivery is possible without the systems and processes being in place. “Leaders have implemented several initiatives to improve the provision. These include the purchase of software to help managers monitor and record apprentices’ progress more effectively and a review of the procedures for apprentice recruitment.”



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ Delivery that is incremental and well planned to link taught knowledge and theory to the development of skills and behaviours in the workplace.
- ✓ Regular tripartite reviews should be used to celebrate progress, to monitor progress against starting points (including KSBs and functional skills), identify and weaknesses or issues that require addressing, and ensure that appropriate support is in place. Reviews should also include careers, wellbeing and safeguarding, prevent and British values.



Safeguarding, welfare and guidance



Issues

A number of organisations have been criticised for not embedding safeguarding, welfare and guidance – including relevant topics such as equality and diversity, preventing radicalisation, and health and safety – into their apprentices’ experiences. Inspectors also pick up where organisations fail to provide enough “helpful careers information, advice and guidance, so they are aware of the career options open to them outside of their current employer”.



Outstanding practice

On the flip side, other institutions help their apprentices to not only have a good understanding of British values, and equality and diversity but also show evidence that they understand how they are applied in the workplace. Furthermore, the best-in-class reports explain that “apprentices gain from highly accessible and high-quality careers advice and guidance that support them effectively in planning for the next stage in their careers”.



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Ofsted report, 2021



What Ofsted is looking for

- ✓ A learner's career aspirations need to be captured at the outset.
- ✓ Ofsted core topics should be embedded into the curriculum and reviews, with appropriate guidance and articulation around how they can be applied to the workplace and role.
- ✓ Careers advice must be impartial.

How Aptem supports the HE sector

Aptem Apprenticeship is the leading end-to-end apprenticeship delivery system, and is already used by 30 universities, including Middlesex University, University of Cambridge, University of Nottingham and University of Salford. More institutions are coming on board every month.

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Next steps



Aptem works in partnership with the Fellowship of Inspection Nominees (FIN) to help universities prepare for a successful outcome in their next inspection. Through this partnership you can access regular webinars and bootcamps designed for managers and staff involved in the planning, delivery and quality improvement of apprenticeship programmes, and for those intending to lead their organisation through a future Ofsted inspection.

Contact us at hello@aptem.co.uk for details.

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