

Education and Training Skills Ltd

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Paul James HMI

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Type of provider: Adult and community learning

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Interim visit

Context and focus of visit

On 17 March 2020, all routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out 'interim visits' to further education and skills providers. Interim visits are to help learners, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of learners and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

We intend to return to routine inspection in January 2021 but will keep the exact timing under review.

The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below and the findings are based on discussions with leaders, managers, staff and learners.

Information about the provider

Education and Training Skills Ltd (ETS) operates in south west England with a head office in Exeter. ETS provides intermediate, advanced and higher-level apprenticeships. These include apprenticeships in business administration, customer service, sales, team leading, management, and information and communication technology. ETS subcontracts to Devon and Cornwall Police, providing emergency contact handler apprenticeship programmes.

What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of learners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?

At the start of the period when providers were only open to some learners due to COVID-19 restrictions, leaders moved the majority of their face-to-face learning sessions online. They worked with their trainers and employers to ensure that all apprentices could continue to access their apprenticeship programmes. Managers provided laptops to any apprentices who did not have the equipment needed to study remotely. Apprentices appreciated being able to continue their studies during COVID-19 restrictions, even if they had been furloughed.

Leaders recognised that some apprenticeship programmes needed to be amended due to changes in apprentices' work environments as a result of COVID-19. For example, apprentice emergency call handlers experienced significant increases in their workload. Leaders worked with Devon and Cornwall Police to re-structure the initial training that apprentices received. They reduced the amount of face-to-face teaching, but extended the time staff had been given to provide mentoring to apprentices. Senior leaders also revised the content of the customer service apprentices' curriculum, increasing the focus on the use of electronic communication in response to the rising demand during the period of COVID-19 restrictions.

Managers have developed a three-tier approach to supporting apprentices. They vary the levels of face-to-face and remote training provided to apprentices, based on the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the workplace. If restrictions result in a significant increase in apprentices' workloads, trainers offer shorter but more frequent lessons.

Managers have introduced different ways for learners to record and evidence the work they have completed. For example, if apprentices take on additional work due to colleagues being furloughed, managers arrange for them to undertake and record professional discussions as an alternative to completing extended writing tasks. This helps apprentices to stay on track and to maximise the opportunities to gather additional evidence at work.

Leaders take advantage of the flexibility offered by online training to provide apprentices with additional learning opportunities. Apprentices can now access free online courses that focus on relevant themes, such as developing resilience, supporting good mental health, leading meetings and minute taking.

What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of learners?

Managers use apprentices' feedback to identify what they found helpful in learning sessions, as well as suggestions on how these could be improved. Managers analyse this feedback regularly and share a summary of the findings and planned responses with all staff. Leaders find that this is a useful way of confirming where training is meeting apprentices' needs and identifying the areas for improvement. Leaders join virtual teaching sessions to check the quality of the curriculum content and teaching and assessment.

Trainers save significant time by communicating virtually with apprentices as opposed to travelling to meet them in person. They use this additional time to offer longer and more frequent one-to-one support sessions for apprentices. Apprentices appreciate the extra time this gives them with trainers, although some told us that they would appreciate occasional face-to-face contact as well.

Trainers continue to complete regular reviews with apprentices, either face to face or online. Trainers use these reviews to help them understand the changing pressures apprentices face at work. They discuss how they can best support apprentices to make progress in their learning. Trainers also provide careers guidance in these sessions, making links to apprentices' original training plans and discussing how these may be influenced by the pandemic.

Leaders report that they will continue to deliver parts of their programmes online after the pandemic. They acknowledge the importance of continuing to develop staff expertise in using online teaching and assessment methods. Leaders have scheduled a week of training for all staff in January. They plan to include tips and strategies for using online tools effectively, with opportunities for staff to share and learn from

good practice, for example using tips on how best to structure online learning sessions and the effective use of virtual break-out rooms.

How are leaders ensuring that learners are safe and well informed about potential risks, including from online sources?

Leaders ensure that trainers have the time and opportunity to speak with apprentices about their well-being and safety. Staff are aware of changes in apprentices' behaviour or demeanour and provide them with advice and support as required. Apprentices working for Devon and Cornwall Police have access to a wide range of support, including counselling and professional specialist advice through their employer.

ETS managers produce a regular safeguarding and well-being newsletter for staff, apprentices and employers. This contains information and advice about a range of issues that could affect apprentices, such as county lines and domestic abuse. Staff ensure that emergency call handler apprentices, who deal with potentially serious issues, have access to additional support, such as a dedicated intranet site that provides them with helpful advice on managing stress and well-being.

Managers receive regular updates about safeguarding and 'Prevent' duty issues through their local authority and police force networks. All staff undertake mandatory training in safeguarding and online safety. Apprentices are taught how to manage their stress and maintain cyber-security requirements.

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