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Case Study Extracted From:

When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

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When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

Case Study of Practice

Embedding the Education Inspection Framework into HE Quality Assurance Processes

Sharon Green¹²

1. Context

The Office of Apprenticeships and Skills (OAS) is an independent department recently created within the University of Lincoln. OAS provides expert guidance and direction to all staff involved in the delivery of apprenticeship programmes and their employers. It maintains the key university systems, documents, and records relating to all apprenticeship operations, and is responsible for the management and facilitation of external reviews and audits. The Office is at the forefront of developing an exemplary apprenticeship and skills experience, championing continual improvement and consistent high performance across all areas of the university to ensure ongoing compliance and the sharing of best practice across academic and professional services teams. OAS also operates as an End Point Assessment Organisation for Integrated Degree Apprenticeship programmes.

2. The innovation

In response to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) audit conducted in Autumn/Winter 2022, an auditing team was established within the Office of Apprenticeships and Skills (OAS). In April 2023, new team members were recruited to OAS and key auditing activities were arranged based on findings from the ESFA audit. 16 auditing activities were completed between April and August 2023. Ahead of the 23/24 academic year, an annual auditing plan was produced and shared with schools. 9 planned audits were completed in September and October 2023. For every audit completed, the OAS produces and shares a report with schools on its findings. Good quality practice is highlighted, and an action plan is included for areas of improvement or follow-up actions.

The OAS team lead on cross-institutional preparation for, and organisation of, internal and external institutional reviews/verifications and external audits of apprenticeship provision, including Ofsted inspection/monitoring visits, Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) assurance reviews and Office for Students (OfS) End Point Assessment assurance reviews. The team ensures that the University fully

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understands and meets the requirements of, and is fully prepared for, external audits and reviews, by developing internal audits, running regular updates, training sessions, and developing associated learning materials. They hold regular apprenticeship conferences for both internal staff and wider employer networks, to ensure all parties are up to date with regulations and developments in apprenticeship provision. They support apprenticeship delivery teams across schools and colleges to lead institutional awareness and knowledge of education policy and changes in relation to apprenticeships, and manage any associated dissemination required through interpretation and explanation of complex systems and processes. OAS have taken responsible for the accuracy of the data return, submitted to the ESFA, which is used to calculate institutional funding, and contributes to all official government statistics. Funding for apprenticeships is based on a strict rule-based system which must be accurate, timely and detailed. Monthly reviews of payments and error reports were instigated and are now completed and reviewed by OAS to recognise where funding is being lost and how these issues can be prevented/resolved. A robust audit schedule has been produced for 2023-24 academic year and bespoke audits are offered to all schools ad hoc. 30 audits have been completed to date since April 2023 to support quality measures and provide guidance and support on best practice and collaborative practices. The University's ESFA QA review was concluded in January 2023 providing assurance that continuous improvement activities are having a positive impact. Improvements have been implemented to the service offered as an EPAO alongside development of processes in line with OfS guidelines.

3. Quality Assurance

The apprenticeship levy makes it almost compulsory for employers to offer apprenticeship training, it continues to spark a national rethink about how apprenticeships are delivered. It is more than a financial requirement to invest, with its long list of compliance rules and regulations and so our role in directing and inspiring teams to realise our shared vision of excellence must be more than just about being compliant. Building agility and resilience across teams is essential and we lead by example with a pragmatic approach to QA and compliance. OAS drive the quality of apprenticeship provision across different schools, bringing together standardised practice to support quality alongside ensuring the individual disciplines maintain the unique elements that ensure excellent provision. OAS also delivers a high-quality End Point Assessment (EPA) Service to deliver secure, valid, and robust EPAs, as specified in Integrated Degree Apprenticeship Assessment Plans. The team leads the development and integrity of the University's policies and processes governing EPAO, ensuring that they meet national external requirements. Being able to constructively critique our effectiveness is essential in the different parts of our institutional function where pragmatic decision making has developed to consider the wider implications of colleagues. Inspections require us to strive for excellence, but we find that strategic plans can confuse what this means and how we achieve it. We believe it's simply customer satisfaction. The vision of excellence needs to be simple; all stakeholders can then understand it. We can only get consistent success in delivery when whole teams adapt/involve supporting delivery model and focus on performance goals embedded within our quality cycles. In the current unprecedented levels of competition in education it is not enough to deliver agile programmes, it is essential to build sustainable agility by extending those agile principals across the entire institution to drive better and have all-round excellence. This is an agility as a culture, a mindset, and an operating model; an enhanced way of performing deliveries towards excellence.

4. Outcomes

Assessment should be used to check and develop apprentices' understanding, to inform innovative teaching, and to help apprentices embed and use their knowledge, skills, and behaviours fluently, rather than as an exercise in memorising disconnected facts to pass a test. Our QA focus will be on how assessment is used to support the teaching of the curriculum. This means that we will consider how well apprentices are doing in relation to the point they have reached in the curriculum. Assessment should be used to help identify the next steps for apprentices and their employers and to make sure that they are sufficiently prepared for the next stage in their learning journey or for end point assessment.

OAS does not spend significant amounts of time looking at the internal progress and attainment data collected within school. We expect any collection of assessment data to be proportionate with a clear strategy around impact. As part of annual self-assessment reporting, we want to see that assessment data is used to inform clear actions as part of our annual quality improvement cycle of actions and activities. We also look out for overuse and misuse of assessment, expecting managers and programme leads to understand its limitations. Moreover, the Ofsted Inspection Handbook explicitly states that, although national assessments and examinations are 'useful indicators outcomes', they only represent 'a sample' of what apprentices have learned, and this is only valuable in the context of their progress in the wider curriculum. We are looking for meaningful assessment, not meaningless data.

5. Takeaways

- We look at how our curriculum equips apprentices with the knowledge, skills, and behaviours they need for success in the future, helping them overcome any barriers caused by social disadvantage.
- We pay attention to whether academics notice gaps in knowledge, skills and behaviours and the actions that programme leads take to fill these, to secure apprentices' readiness for future learning.
- We look for coherently planned and sequenced curriculum to ensure that apprentices are working towards defined milestone and end points.
- We expect high ambitions for apprentices, irrespective of their starting points, and particularly in relation to retention within their specialist sectors.
- We expect leaders to demonstrate a plan and to show that they are taking action to implement changes to the curriculum as part of effective self-assessment reporting.