

Birmingham Metropolitan College

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Andrea Dill-Russell, HMI

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Type of provider: General further education college

Address: Jennens Road
Birmingham
B4 7PS

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

Birmingham Metropolitan College is a large, general further education college located across three main colleges, with two smaller campuses. The college recruits from local communities in Birmingham and the Black Country. At the time of the visit, there were approximately 10,000 students. Most students on full-time programmes are aged 16 to 18. Most employers linked to the college are within the regions covered by the Black Country, and Greater Birmingham and Solihull local enterprise partnerships. The college delivers training in partnership with a number of large employers.

Many students are from the most economically deprived areas in the West Midlands. Unemployment rates in Birmingham and Dudley are higher than in the West Midlands overall and national rates. Around 50% of students are from minority ethnic groups.

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?

Leaders prioritised support and training for staff and students at the start of the pandemic. They provided staff with digital skills training in readiness for changing the curriculum delivery method prior to the lockdown. Most students accessed learning remotely during this time. Leaders identified groups of students for whom technology was a barrier to accessing online learning. For example, staff developed paper-based resource packs for students on level 1 programmes, and for those students whose first language is not English.

Leaders identified which students needed to return first to face-to-face teaching once they were able to reopen sites in June. Leaders devised strategic planning groups to support the return to on-site teaching. They liaised with managers, teachers and

staff to plan the return. Leaders prioritised students who needed practical skills training. Teachers worked with students who required support to take external examinations. They stated that the strategies used to support students to return informed the planning for the September restart.

Leaders have identified the different challenges involved in teaching the curriculum for each subject area. They have modified the planning and delivery of the curriculum to address current restrictions. Staff have identified which subjects require students to complete industry placements as part of their course. For example, they have reordered the curriculum in health and social care. Teachers are developing students' skills and knowledge of the workplace through virtual visits to care settings in preparation for when placements can take place.

Leaders planned courses to meet the needs of the local economy during the pandemic. During the visit, inspectors talked to external partners. They said, 'Leaders have been nimble in the creation of training courses for adults made redundant during the lockdown.' Through the Careers Advance courses staff provided careers education, information, advice and guidance, alongside vocational training to support adults back into work.

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?

Leaders identified that discussions with curriculum managers allowed them to modify the curriculum on an ongoing basis. They report that teachers have reviewed and identified different teaching methods, including the use of remote learning. For example, teachers have used video conferencing software to create peer groups and study groups for students. Students are able to access the curriculum, as well as support from each other, when working from home.

Leaders state that they have worked with staff to review students' progress. They have provided extra help for students, in particular when they have been working remotely. Teachers have used the information on students' progress during lockdown to inform their curriculum planning.

Leaders identified that new students aged 16 to 18 have different starting points to those who are returning. Leaders have developed an extended induction period to provide careers education, information, advice and guidance, and to allow for English, mathematics and skills assessments to take place.

Leaders reported that they have reviewed the quality of teaching of the curriculum throughout the pandemic. They undertook virtual learning walks during lockdown. Leaders introduced face-to-face learning walks on the return to on-site teaching. They have continued with virtual visits to remote learning sessions, or where social distancing is challenging. They have been able to provide staff with feedback, support and training as a result of this process.

Leaders have prioritised those students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) during this time. They provided additional training to support the move to remote learning for those students with SEND. On the return to on-site teaching, leaders have scheduled 'drop-down' workshops to provide additional help for students when they need it.

Leaders have identified that some students thrived when working from home. Teachers recognised that some students made more rapid progress as a result of remote learning. They have identified that these students are finding it challenging to return to face-to-face teaching.

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

Leaders gave safeguarding training for staff and students prior to the lockdown. They supported students to understand the risks of studying online. Managers trained staff to use a new monitoring system to track and manage safeguarding concerns.

Leaders have provided well-being support for students. Staff continue to monitor students' support needs. They have identified the need to increase the availability of counselling support, in particular for those affected by the pandemic. Leaders set up operational groups at each college to implement a safe return to on-site delivery. They prioritised learners, including the most vulnerable, in their plans for the phased return. To support this, leaders produced videos of each site, demonstrating the protocols that students would need to follow on their return. During the visit, inspectors talked to a small number of students. They said, 'Staff ensure students follow the college procedures; this helps us to feel safe.'

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Piccadilly Gate
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