

Abingdon and Witney College

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	130793
Name of lead inspector:	Peter Cox, HMI
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Type of provider:	General further education college
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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 (SEND).

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

Abingdon and Witney College is a medium-sized further education college serving the local community of Oxfordshire and the surrounding areas. The college has three main sites: one in Abingdon, one in Witney and a rural skills centre in Hailey. Community learning takes place in a number of community-based hub centres. The college provides a range of vocational and adult courses as well as apprenticeships. There are approximately 1,650 16- to 18-year-old learners on academic and vocational programmes, 400 apprentices and 2,100 adult learners. There are around 250 learners in receipt of high needs funding.

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 and managers told us they were determined to minimise disruption to learning throughout the pandemic. Managers described how they moved to remote learning swiftly. Leaders and managers provided additional pastoral support for vulnerable learners and those with anxieties caused by lockdown. For learners with SEND, leaders put in place arrangements to support them, including face-to-face teaching.

Staff described the changes to the curriculum that have been introduced in response to the pandemic. They have carried out additional assessments to identify gaps in knowledge. Managers have introduced new courses, such as digital skills for life, to help learners develop essential information technology (IT) skills and confidence. Leaders intend to introduce new traineeships and additional qualifications for apprentices, to meet new local skills needs which have arisen from the pandemic.

Learners have returned to the college with a combination of face-to-face and remote teaching. Managers explained how learners on lower-level courses and those studying on courses with substantial practical elements receive a greater proportion of face-to-face teaching. Staff who work with learners with additional learning needs or disabilities provided enhanced support to ease transition back to college. Leaders and managers told inspectors that nearly all learners are enthusiastic about returning to college.

Inspectors spoke with a small sample of employers, subcontractors and other organisations who work with the college. They were positive about the support they had received from college staff. They described how staff had tailored learning in response to lockdown. They told inspectors about how clear and frequent communication with college staff has helped reduce learners' anxieties. Staff and employers felt that lockdown has led to greater employer involvement in apprenticeships.

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?

Staff described how they worked relentlessly to make sure that all learners and apprentices were not disadvantaged in their learning because of the pandemic. They spoke highly of the quality of training and support they received to move to online learning. They received bespoke IT training and shared good practice. Staff we spoke to are proud of the improvements to their digital skills. They feel confident and secure in reverting to remote delivery if necessary.

Leaders and managers provided equipment to make sure learners could access online teaching. Staff commented on the benefits and opportunities of online learning for their learners. For example, guest speakers in music technology attended online sessions to share current industry and sector experience. Leaders shared with inspectors the positive survey results from learners about learning during lockdown.

Staff described how their curriculum has been redesigned to a blended learning approach, so learners can access online taught sessions and resources. They told inspectors about the enhanced assessments of learners to adapt the content and order of courses to address any gaps. Leaders and managers described the reviews of online lessons and learners' work to check on their progress. They explained changes to the order of teaching so that practical topics are taught first to limit the impact of a second lockdown.

Staff acknowledge that mental health and well-being are priorities, particularly for learners with additional learning needs or disabilities. They described regular reviews of learners to make sure they were getting the necessary support. They have adapted the tutorial programme to help learners build resilience and develop good working habits.

Leaders reported that careers advisers completed frequent face-to-face and virtual guidance sessions throughout lockdown, involving parents where necessary. This support continues as learners return to college.

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

Leaders and managers reported how staff and learners received appropriate training and know how to keep safe, including online. The safeguarding team put in place additional training on topics such as online grooming, online extremism and domestic violence.

Leaders and managers explained the steps taken to identify and help learners at risk prior to, during and after lockdown. Staff spoke with vulnerable learners on a weekly basis. They have created individual risk assessments to support particularly vulnerable learners. Leaders told inspectors that they continue to work well with external safeguarding agencies.

Leaders and managers told us about the additional safety measures to allow safe return to college. They have put in place additional support in returning to college for those learners with learning needs or disabilities. The small number of staff and learners that inspectors spoke with feel safe returning to college.

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