

West Herts College

Interim visit report

Unique reference number: 130720

Name of lead inspector: Linnia Khemdoudi HMI

Visit date(s): 6 to 7 October 2020

Type of provider: General further education college

Address: Hempstead Road
Watford
Hertfordshire
WD17 3EZ

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 students and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and 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

West Herts College and Barnfield College merged to become the West Herts College Group on 1 February 2019. West Herts College is a large provider with around 6,000 learners following study programmes, 445 apprenticeships, and 1,700 adults. A small number of learners with high needs study foundation, employability courses and study programmes. The college has four campuses located in Watford, Hemel Hempstead and Luton. Learners access the college from a wide geographical area that includes west Hertfordshire and parts of north London.

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 describe a responsive approach to curriculum planning for adult skills development. For example, leaders have developed additional courses to support local and regional economic priorities, such as logistics and digital. The college also works closely with a subcontractor in Luton. They deliver additional English and mathematics courses virtually to respond to the high levels of unemployment in the area.

Leaders recognise the challenge in sourcing appropriate work placements for young people. Teachers describe alternative experiences of work, including virtual tours and meetings with employers. Leaders acknowledge that this is beneficial for learners but is not a substitute for being in a real work environment.

Leaders expressed a clear expectation for all learners and apprentices to be back in face-to-face learning environments. They describe online learning as a back up where learners or staff are self-isolating, or where assessors cannot meet with apprentices on site. For adult learners, different blended models are available. These include fully online courses and one third virtual delivery of access programmes.

Leaders identify issues in assessing apprentices' workplace skills in the trade areas. Apprentices complete assessments in college workshops where appropriate. Trainers have frequent virtual meetings with apprentices to check their progress. Managers recognise the need to help apprentices source new jobs if required. As a result, they have introduced additional activities such as employment masterclasses.

Leaders describe many positives to the new systems they have developed to comply with COVID-19 restrictions. Virtual advice, guidance and career sessions have proved to be popular with both learners and parents. Staff have adapted the careers advice they give learners to reflect the restricted opportunities in some sectors. For example, advising learners to develop the wider skills needed to succeed in the hospitality industry. This will help prepare learners for when employment opportunities become available in this area.

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 identify preparation for future local restrictions as crucial to their plans for this academic year. In response, staff have prioritised practical skills development in vocational learning, including those skills that learners can not safely learn at home. For example, in beauty therapy, waxing and eye treatments. Teachers recognise the importance of ensuring that learners quickly gain the basic skills they require so that they can build on and master these skills in different environments. Teachers say they feel well prepared for potential future local restrictions.

Teachers use a range of assessments to identify gaps in learners' practical skills, theoretical knowledge and professional behaviours. Staff in some areas have completed assessments with learners pre-enrolment which they have used to inform curriculum planning. Staff have planned extra assessment points throughout the academic year to monitor and help them intervene quickly should learners fall behind.

Staff recognise that, through lockdown and into this academic year, parental involvement has increased. They feel that this has provided more support for young people and improved their motivation to succeed. Furthermore, teachers say that learners are more engaged in learning post-lockdown. Learners recognise that it was difficult to practise and improve their practical skills during lockdown. However, they value online learning as a tool for not missing out on learning when away from college. Learners appreciate the work staff have done to ensure that they can access learning in real time.

Teachers value working collaboratively with student support colleagues. For example, joint development of learning materials to ensure that they are accessible to learners with additional learning needs. Leaders and staff refer to a successful transition to providing virtual additional learning support. Staff describe improved support for

learners with a learning need. Teachers described how they supported learners with autism. This enabled their parents/carers to be able to help learners access learning during lockdown.

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

Leaders risk assessed all learners at the start of lockdown to identify what potential issues they were facing. Leaders say that this led to frequent checks on a high number of learners' safety throughout restrictions. They continued to monitor these learners through the summer break to ensure they remained safe. Leaders intend to adopt these measures going forward. Teachers are well prepared for identifying and dealing with concerns for learners during potential future local restrictions.

Managers have developed an online e-safety course for all learners to complete at the beginning of their courses. This is to check that learners understand how to conduct themselves safely when learning online. Learners are able to describe how to stay safe online in a general sense, but they do not attribute this knowledge to the online course. Learners are well informed about measures to stay safe in relation to COVID-19.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2020