

East Sussex College Group

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	130665
Name of lead inspector:	Ann Monaghan, 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.

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

East Sussex College Group is a large general further education college serving the surrounding towns and rural areas. It was formed in March 2018 as a result of a merger between Sussex Coast College Hastings and Sussex Downs College. The college has around 4,745 learners aged 16 to 18, around 505 adult learners and 2,526 apprentices. One hundred and ten learners are in receipt of high needs funding. Courses are offered from entry level to degree level, with a range of full and part-time courses offered in most subjects. The college has four campuses, at Hastings, Eastbourne, Newhaven and Lewes.

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 have reviewed their curriculum offer and made adaptations to respond to the changed circumstances. They have increased their focus on learners' well-being and mental health to tackle the raised levels of anxiety for more vulnerable learners. Staff and learners told us about the support they have received and how this has helped them cope with the new ways of working and learning.

Subcontractors report that they have had effective support from leaders to adapt their provision to better meet the needs of their learners. They have received advice on moving learning to an online platform as well as sharing resources on well-being and mental health.

Leaders accelerated existing plans to use technology in teaching and learning, as a result of the lockdown. They have invested in new equipment and software.

Teachers have received training so that they have the confidence and skills to teach online.

Leaders are ensuring that curriculum managers are identifying learners who are at risk due to gaps in their learning. Teachers are monitoring all learners on a weekly basis and supporting the ones who need extra help. Curriculum managers are about to implement key assessment points far earlier than normal to ensure that learners are making progress with their learning.

Leaders have maintained close links with the local authority and other strategic partners so that they can respond to local needs and review their practices, learning from local experiences. For example, local college leaders have shared approaches to risk management and responses to local outbreaks of COVID-19.

Leaders have worked with local partners to develop new courses in response to the needs of employers during the pandemic. Primary care staff in the local NHS trust have attended courses on how to use online meeting software, enabling them to work more flexibly.

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 value how their staff have adapted to the changed circumstances and are working hard to make sure that all learners are confident and ready to learn. Teachers appreciate the training and support they have had to develop their skills in using online teaching tools. They work collaboratively and share good practice across teams.

Leaders and managers have reviewed their curriculum models and prioritised the development of knowledge and skills that learners will need if a further lockdown happens. They have reflected on the lessons learned during the lockdown earlier in the year and are working to ensure that learners will be able to make use of the specialist resources at college as much as possible. Learners on vocational courses are focusing on learning practical skills by maximising their time spent in the workshops and training facilities. A-level teachers are focusing on learners' subject-specific skills and identifying any knowledge gaps for those learners who missed much of their final year at school due to the pandemic.

Curriculum managers are developing online learning resources to enable learners to maintain their studies in the event of a further lockdown or the need to self-isolate. Teachers discussed the development of online learning within their own curriculum team. Hairdressing learners have the required equipment, including hair cutting blocks, sent to their homes so they can practise their skills whilst watching their tutor demonstrate on an e-learning platform.

Teachers report high levels of anxiety for many learners as they have returned to college. They have prioritised well-being as part of an extended induction process. Managers outlined the support strategies for learners with support needs, which include frequent telephone contact with learners and their parents, including a welcome session at the start of the year. Staff organise weekly virtual exercise classes that learners attend from their homes. These have helped to maintain contact and group support as well as physical well-being.

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

Leaders have ensured that staff are clear on their safeguarding responsibilities. They provide updates on local and national advice as part of weekly communication. Staff appreciate the focus on learners' safety and mental health. They welcomed a recent mental health training programme to enable them to support their own well-being as well as that of their colleagues and the learners.

Leaders and managers have refined their safeguarding procedures to include advice and guidance on online learning. Teachers and learners told us about expected practices when working or studying remotely, such as the use of appropriate backgrounds and dress codes.

Leaders have maintained their list of at-risk learners who are monitored and supported by the team of mentors. Curriculum managers review the learner cohort to identify any additional vulnerable learners. Managers talked about interventions they had made to support learners whose home life had become more challenging due to the lockdown.

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