

Luton Sixth Form College

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Michael Worgs, HMI

Visit date(s): 30 September 2020 to 1 October 2020

Type of provider: Further Education

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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 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

Luton Sixth Form College is located in the north of Luton. Luton has areas that are among the UK's most deprived, with high levels of unemployment significantly above the national rate. The college has one main site and provides a large variety of academic and vocational qualifications. Most students are from minority ethnic groups and reside in the most deprived areas of Luton.

At the time of the visit, 3,172 students study at the college. Most students study advanced-level courses and a quarter resit their qualifications in English and mathematics. Around 199 students study BTEC level 2 courses. 22 students are in receipt of high needs funding. The college works with a range of employers as part of its employability strategy and does not work with any subcontractors.

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 carried out an extensive student survey in the summer to have a better understanding of what model of learning would work best for their students. They decided to use a blended learning approach that involves students spending two thirds of their time working remotely online, with the remaining third of their learning in college. Leaders feel that by reducing class sizes for students when in college, and increasing the online learning element of programmes, they will have enough resources available to support vulnerable and disadvantaged students. Leaders describe this model as a flexible and agile blended learning approach which will allow them to continue to provide the curriculum with little disruption to learning if there are future local restrictions.

Leaders say that the college remains financially healthy and that they have invested more money to support safeguarding and the digital poverty issues students

experience. For example, they have diverted funds to create additional private learning spaces, purchased an additional 200 laptops and committed to an additional 3,500 staff hours to support their vulnerable students, including those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Leaders saw a greater need to ensure that the curriculum in September 2020 is planned to compensate for any gaps in learning that students may have as a result of the national lockdown. They have started classes on Saturday and Sunday to support second year A-level students and those who are resitting their GCSE English and mathematics examinations.

Over ninety percent of students are on level 3 courses. Leaders have put plans in place that they feel will help students meet the demands of studying advance-level courses. Leaders and managers plan early intervention and assessments along with weekly pastoral conversations with students to ensure they receive appropriate help from their teachers, progress coaches and academic improvement mentors.

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 and managers say that in order to ensure that all teaching staff maintain a consistently high-quality teaching approach using the new blended model, they are changing their formal lesson observation process.

Managers report that they are actively supporting teachers to help them become familiar with the new model and reinforce leaders' expectations. Teachers are expected to develop high-quality online teaching resources to support students to build their knowledge and skills. Leaders have recruited a specialist virtual learning environment (VLE) content developer. Managers encourage teachers to use tools such as Kahoot and the Microsoft Teams facilities to check with students to see if they are actively learning in their online sessions.

Teachers have been given sufficient time and opportunity to develop their online teaching skills. They feel that this has helped them build their confidence, and that they would continue to provide an online element in their teaching after the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers have redesigned their curriculum by bringing forward the theory modules.

Teachers are aware of the drop in attendance when compared to a similar period last academic year. They report that aspects of this is beyond their control due to a large number of students self-isolating, local restrictions and not all students taking an active part in their own learning. Teachers say that they are regularly contacting students who don't attend, that they provide catch up sessions and are making use of the academic improvement mentors to provide further help to those students who they identify as struggling.

Managers report that the main provision for careers advice and guidance was a virtual careers fair where around 80 universities, employers and apprenticeship providers attended. Students are also assigned a progress coach who provides help with individual careers and next step planning. Additional resources are made available to students on the VLE so that they were not further disadvantaged by the lockdown.

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

Leaders report that they recognise the local need to have secure and simple systems in place to identify the safeguarding needs of their students. They therefore continued with their centralised triage system to identify students at risk and quickly signpost them to the correct staff or services. Leaders are confident that the core safeguarding team are in regular contact with vulnerable students and maintain good contacts with multiple agencies to ensure that students are appropriately supported.

Leaders told inspectors that all staff and students have received wider safeguarding and staying safe online training. Leaders acknowledge there is more work to do to reinforce safeguarding messages for new students.

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