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Chesterfield College

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	130638
Name of lead inspector:	Helen Whelan, Her Majesty's Inspector
Visit date(s):	22–23 October 2020
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 students, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of students and apprentices in this period, including students 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 students.

Information about the provider

Chesterfield College is a large further education college based in Chesterfield with three satellite apprenticeship centres in Derby, Manchester and Nottingham. It offers courses from entry level through to higher education in all subject areas apart from agriculture, horticulture and animal care. Most students come from the local area. At the time of the visit, there were 2,506 students on education programmes for young people, 1,307 following an apprenticeship and 1,020 adults on classroom-based courses. 35 students received high needs funding.

What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of students and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?

College leaders responded to the COVID-19 restrictions by swiftly developing protocols for staff and students to work from home. They moved most learning to an online platform and made sure that students and apprentices could access IT equipment, learning resources and well-being support.

The start of courses has been extended to allow teachers time to understand students' starting points. Teachers have assessed students' practical skills and understanding of theory to identify any gaps and help them catch up. When deciding on the best method of teaching, leaders consider the requirements of the course, the qualification level and students' needs. For example, level 1 construction students attend lessons in small groups to develop their practical skills and ensure social distancing.

Employers report that apprentices' progress has not been hindered by the pandemic as work-based coaches maintained frequent contact with apprentices, including those who had been furloughed. Employers value the information provided to them

by an electronic assessment tracker which allows them to see exactly where apprentices are up to in their studies.

Each curriculum area has a designated teaching and learning quality lead who supports teachers with their practice. Managers conduct supportive visits to lessons, provide coaching support for teachers and arrange for them to belong to communities of practice. These involve teachers working in small groups to review their teaching methods and plan their professional development. The leadership team meets weekly to review students' attendance and progress to identify problems early and address them quickly.

Middle managers describe how senior leaders encouraged them to try new ways of working during the COVID-19 restrictions. Teachers talk of increased collaboration and camaraderie during the pandemic which allowed them to work together to develop their online teaching methods and make learning more interactive and relevant for students and apprentices.

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 students?

Managers describe how teachers are using digital learning tools in new and effective ways. In plumbing, students complete a treasure hunt at home to find stop taps and isolation valves, as well as to identify potential issues with plumbing. Teachers are beginning to use online quizzes, breakout rooms for small-group discussion and online forms as part of lessons. Teachers have adapted approaches to support students more reluctant to engage in online learning, such as providing more individual tutorials.

Teachers were given the freedom to review courses and make changes they felt were needed because of the pandemic. Students on health and care programmes have looked at how COVID-19 has changed the health and care sector, and hair and beauty students have focused on the increased requirements for health and safety, including personal protective equipment.

During the summer, new students were able to access learning materials through an online 'virtual heartspace'. Managers believe this helped prepare students for college as they gained an understanding of the course. For those students returning to college, teachers used the heartspace to provide materials to plug gaps in students' knowledge and to communicate their expectations. Staff report this has had a positive impact on students' attendance and engagement.

To pre-empt possible future restrictions, managers have made sure students are developing their digital skills during their first few weeks in college so they will be confident if they need to learn remotely. Students have been issued with kits to enable them to complete practical activities at home.

Careers advice and guidance staff have received updates about how COVID-19 is affecting recruitment so they can better support students and apprentices in a tumultuous jobs market. Lead coaches work closely with students who may be on the wrong course in order to ease their transition to a more suitable course.

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

Safeguarding concerns increased during COVID-19 restrictions. Managers maintained weekly contact with all vulnerable students and involved parents and support agencies, as appropriate.

Students and apprentices report a variety of ways to get help, such as counselling and support from mentors. Staying safe forms a key part of the start to all courses and tutorials reinforce this further.

Staff work closely with students who have high needs and complete their education, health and care plans remotely. Additional learning support staff provide training for parents/carers, so they can support students' learning and ensure they work safely online.

Staff receive regular training in safeguarding. The safeguarding lead reports that a psychological first aid course has been particularly useful during the restrictions. Information has been shared with staff to provide them with tools to talk about mental health and to signpost students and apprentices for help. Managers report a culture of vigilance around safeguarding.

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