

Expanse Learning (Expanse Group Ltd)

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Alex Lang, HMI

Visit date(s): 14–15 October 2020

Type of provider: Independent specialist college

Address: Leigh Sports Stadium
Sale Way
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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

Expanse Learning (Expanse Group Limited) is an independent provider of specialist education, health and social care, and professional-skills development programmes. At the time of the visit, 74 learners aged 16 to 25 years were studying on classroom or work-based programmes and supported internships. The college has three learning facilities in Greater Manchester, one in Leigh and two in Wigan. Approximately three quarters of learners have moderate learning difficulties and the remainder have severe learning difficulties or profound and complex disabilities.

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 have built on the original curriculum during the pandemic, focusing on health and mental well-being. During the COVID-19 restriction period, they changed from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Online teaching was supported by specially designed work packs aimed at keeping learners engaged in their learning and meeting their individual interests and needs.

Leaders have ensured that learners have access to the necessary technology to continue learning. Learners have been able to borrow laptops and tablet computers. Leaders have invested in digital solutions, including online platforms and specialist software, access to internet services and IT training.

The college remained open for vulnerable learners throughout the COVID-19 restrictions; however, learners' on-site attendance to lessons was low. Parents were reticent to send their young people to college due to their health conditions. Leaders and managers implemented a 'wrap around' well-being service for learners and their families. They checked daily on the well-being of learners through telephone and

video calls. Leaders and managers supported learners with specific personal and pastoral issues. For example, learners being made homeless were supported to find suitable living accommodation and re-engage with their studies.

Leaders were concerned about the impact COVID-19 was having on the transition arrangements for learners starting college in September 2020. Leaders used videos, individual tours and socially distanced coffee mornings to support learners moving from school to college. Despite these alternative arrangements a few learners have had considerable difficulties and anxieties in settling in at college.

Stakeholders are highly complimentary about the actions all staff have taken to support learners and their families throughout the pandemic. They say that Expanse Learning staff have been proactive, supportive and flexible. Local authority stakeholders comment on the effective communication and the creative way leaders at Expanse Learning have made changes and met learners' needs.

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 described how learners need the stability and routine of attending college. The change from attending college to being at home, in addition to fears about COVID-19, has increased learners' anxiety. Leaders and managers closely monitored learners' participation in home-based activities and implemented health and well-being training for staff and learners.

Teachers adapted their online and face-to-face teaching sessions. This flexible approach enabled learners to take part in sessions and continue to learn. One-to-one sessions provided additional support, built learners' confidence and addressed any concerns. For example, one learner who saw the home study period as a holiday received engagement calls from their teacher to help them return to their previous good practice.

Leaders report that the work-placement element of the curriculum is ongoing but on-site opportunities have been restricted due to COVID-19. They have been proactive in sourcing other venues and activities for learners. Leaders are introducing new options such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Learners will have access to a vocational learning centre that contains an employer enterprise hub.

On returning to college, staff completed baseline assessments and amended the curriculum to focus on what they know matters to learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is on building and maintaining relationships with others, being safe, social distancing and personal hygiene. Learners are learning about the effects of the pandemic on them and their families and what it might mean for their future.

Staff development has concentrated on building staff's confidence in delivering online teaching so that lessons are interactive and targeted to learners' specific needs.

Leaders have put in place an individualised staff development programme. Two information technology (IT) champions have been appointed to help staff develop their IT skills.

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

Leaders reported they have been proactive in making rapid changes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They quickly introduced new ways of working safely, using guidance from government and national organisations. They have made a substantial investment in new buildings and vehicles to maintain safe social distancing for work and travel.

Leaders developed an individualised risk assessment for each learner, based on their education, health and care (EHC) plan. They kept in close telephone contact with learners during COVID-19 restrictions. Leaders visited learners in their home or referred them to community partners if they had any concerns about their well-being, for example learners experiencing bereavement.

Learners tell us they feel safe in college. They practice being safe online, for example by not accepting friend requests from people they do not know. They have learned new travel instructions to keep themselves safe when travelling to and from college.

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