

Gateshead College

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Charles Searle, HMI

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Type of provider: General further education college

Address: Baltic Campus
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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

Gateshead College is a large general further education college. It has six campuses in locations in Gateshead, Newcastle and Sunderland. The college serves an area characterised by high levels of social deprivation. At the time of the visit, there were 2,797 learners aged 16 to 18, 1,585 adult learners, 1,057 apprentices, and 59 learners with high needs. The college works with four 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 responded to the national lockdown by harnessing the collaboration and consultation that they had established with staff for a major organisational restructure of the college. This enabled them to plan their way through the various stages of the pandemic.

Prior to the lockdown, leaders had invested in virtual learning platforms and had adopted more flexible ways of working for members of staff. These developments helped to ease the transition to remote learning for all teachers and learners.

Leaders kept one central campus open during the initial phase of the lockdown for vulnerable learners and the children of key workers. Although take up was low, staff maintained weekly contact with 530 vulnerable learners to check on their welfare and educational progress.

Managers followed their standard timescale to plan the curriculum for the current academic year, using the framework set by senior leaders. These plans were subsequently updated to reflect three potential different scenarios. These were business as usual, a blended learning model, and the reimposition of a full lockdown.

Leaders believe it is still too early to assess the impact of the pandemic on the relevance of the current curriculum. They do not plan to make radical changes to the content of the curriculum. Instead, they are altering the sequence of some activities within programmes, such as pushing back work experience to later in the year.

Leaders have identified a number of challenges that they want to address during the current year. They want to ensure that learners can develop their broader personal and social skills at a time when so much time is spent online. They know that they need to motivate learners about their next steps when the breadth of opportunities for their future appears to be shrinking.

Leaders consider that there have been some positive unintended consequences from the pandemic. They believe, for example, that learners have had to become more innovative in using social media to showcase their skills to potential employers.

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?

Teachers continued to provide learning activities for those learners whose examinations had been cancelled in the summer term or who had completed their final assessments. They encouraged learners to create videos of the skills that they had learned to use in recruitment campaigns for the new academic year.

Teachers and assessors used the early part of the restart of face-to-face teaching to help their learners and apprentices develop some of the skills and knowledge that they had missed learning or had forgotten. For example, apprentices in practical trades, such as construction and engineering, were brought back into workshops in small groups to develop essential hand skills.

Managers have staggered the start to the new academic year for different groups of learners. This enabled them to extend the induction period so that teachers could spend more time establishing the starting points of learners to identify whether they had gaps in their skills and knowledge. This was particularly important in English and mathematics, where staff considered that some teacher-assessed grades from feeder secondary schools were too high.

Teachers have overcome constraints on space and the lack of access to external partners' venues by moving sessions online. Learners on a music course have partnered with a local arts venue to record live performances where learners can develop their skills playing alongside professional practitioners. These recorded sessions can be accessed by self-isolating learners at any time.

Teachers have developed new methods of assessment to accommodate remote learning. For example, in some instances, learners produce 'vlogs' to camera instead of written assessments.

Leaders have ensured that learners continue to receive their entitlement to careers advice and guidance. This starts at induction, when learners establish their career plans. The plans are then revisited at individual sessions with tutorial staff. All of this has been done virtually, when necessary.

Teachers report that attendance at sessions since the restart has been high. They have noticed that learners' enthusiasm for all forms of learning has been redoubled as they welcome the return to social contact with their peers and staff.

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

Leaders and staff identified quickly all those learners who could be at risk during the lockdown. They established a system of regular checks on the welfare and safety of these learners.

Staff provided learners with helpful ideas and resources about how they could stay fit and well while working from home. Each learner was encouraged to develop their own self-care plan.

Leaders ensured that staff were trained in how to deliver online sessions safely, including how to control live chat functions. Learners returning to college for the new term completed courses in 'netiquette' so that they could conduct themselves appropriately online.

Managers have consulted closely with learners and staff about how best to keep everyone safe. They have adopted suggestions such as giving out red wristbands to anyone who wanted to be in college but needed their personal space to be respected by others.

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