

Oaklands College

Interim visit report

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| Visit date(s): | 5–6 November 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 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. Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we made this visit remotely to reduce pressure on the provider.

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

Oaklands College is a large further education and skills provider situated in Hertfordshire. It has campuses in St Albans, Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood. The college has approximately 3,200 young people on study programmes, 570 apprentices, 900 adults and 285 learners with high needs. A very small number of learners aged 14 to 16, funded by schools and the local authority, access day courses.

The college attracts learners and apprentices from Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and a few London boroughs. Around half of learners on study programmes enrol with at least five GCSE qualifications at grade 4 and above, including mathematics and English.

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?

Curriculum managers have developed more flexible models of learning. For example, some adult students access specialist resources intensively for two weeks. They then develop their theoretical knowledge remotely for two weeks. Staff say that this enables students to progress their skills and knowledge in a logical way. Students can complete specialist skills units more quickly. This is in case teachers need to move to a fully remote learning model in the future.

Leaders have implemented a more intensive induction process for all students. This involves a range of assessments to identify gaps in their knowledge and skills, particularly for students new to the college. Students have access to a range of extra

learning sessions to help them catch up. Managers acknowledge that this intensive help will have to continue throughout this academic year.

Managers say that many of the changes they have implemented have been positive. The use of online quizzes that simulate final exams have proved to be beneficial. They say students are better prepared for their exams. Students can also identify gaps in their own learning. This has helped them to identify what they need to revise ready for their final exams.

Leaders have identified that students participation in remote additional learning support has improved. Participation in English and mathematics classes has also improved. Leaders think that students feel more confident to participate and ask questions when they need help. As a result, leaders intend to keep offering these sessions remotely.

Leaders describe the changes they have made to apprenticeship courses as 'transformative'. Changes have enabled staff to spend more time supporting apprentices. For example, instead of eight week reviews they are now able to carry out monthly reviews. This is due to the time assessors save by not travelling between 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 and managers report that students' and apprentices' attendance and participation in learning are high. They also state that students behaviour has improved. For example, they are more motivated and keener to learn. As a result, most apprentices are on target to finish on time.

Managers have re-ordered the content of students learning programmes. They changed training plans to adapt to online and remote learning models. Staff have developed the skills and confidence to use information and communication technology (ICT) to assess students. As a result, students record and livestream demonstrations of their practical skills. Teachers and assessors are able to use these recordings to assess students' competence. This is a change that managers intend to retain.

Managers say that students who speak English as an additional language need to develop their use of ICT to better access their learning. To help students gain the skills they need, they now study towards ICT functional skills qualifications. This rewards them for the achievement of these essential skills.

Managers described the extra help they gave students with learning difficulties/special educational needs to continue to learn. This is because many have had to self-isolate for extended periods. Teachers say that the wider personal help these learners need has continued, for example speech, language, and occupational

therapy. Senior leaders identify that the gaps in ICT skills of parents and carers have been a significant challenge. Managers have responded by providing parents and carers with ICT equipment and help with how to use the technology at home.

Managers and teachers have begun to use virtual work experience on selected programmes, for example health and social care. Leaders are reflecting how best to create more work opportunities across a wider range of programmes, particularly for the imminent traineeship programmes.

Managers describe a range of activities that employers are undertaking with students, for example providing online careers sessions and setting live project briefs. Managers acknowledge that students benefit from more frequent, but shorter, sessions with employers online. This is an area that they intend to keep developing.

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

Leaders have provided students with a dedicated safeguarding email address. This enables students to report concerns easily, even when they are not in college. Staff frequently monitor incoming mail so they can respond quickly should a concern be reported.

Managers implemented additional help for all students in response to the Covid-19 restrictions, for example the use of peer mentors and mental health first aiders. Managers intend to continue to do so because they feel that the issues students faced during the Covid-19 restrictions remain relevant.

Managers covered a range of safety topics with students during induction. Students report that they have received much information about e-safety, for example the relevance of password protection, identity security and personal router security. Students know how to raise any concerns. They are confident of receiving a sympathetic response.

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