

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education

Interim visit report

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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.

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.

Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we made this visit remotely to reduce pressure on the provider.

Information about the provider

Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education is a large general further education college based in Norfolk, which now has over 9,000 students. Over the last three years it has merged twice, first with Paston Sixth Form College (2017) and most recently with the Easton College campus of Easton and Otley College (2020). It operates from three main sites, providing a curriculum offer across all subject sector areas from pre-entry level to Level 6. At the time of the visit there were 5,700 students on study programmes, 1,500 students on apprenticeship programmes including at higher and degree level, and 900 adult students. Norwich City College of Further and Higher Education has 242 students with high needs.

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?

Senior leaders and managers had anticipated the COVID-19 restrictions before they came into place. As a result, they invested time and resources to ensure that teachers and students had the skills and knowledge to continue learning online.

Since September 2020, leaders and managers have aimed to bring all students back for full-time face-to-face teaching. However, due to self-isolation of staff and students, this has not always been possible. In such circumstances teachers use a blended method of teaching.

Senior leaders suggest that the pandemic has encouraged them to work even more closely with their stakeholders, such as the Local Enterprise Partnership, the local authority and employers. For example, Shell have partnered with the college to retrain adults to move into new job opportunities. Employers have also provided virtual talks about employment opportunities as part of the careers advice and guidance programme.

Leaders and managers suggest that the COVID-19 restrictions have had minimal impact on the start of their T-level courses in September 2020. They have recruited the number of students they planned to. The initial feedback from students about their courses has been very positive. However, one of the challenges managers anticipate they will face is securing work placements should current restrictions continue. For example, childcare settings are reluctant to now offer placements because of the potential risk to the children in their care from visitors to their setting.

Managers are reflecting on feedback from teachers about the positive elements of a blended approach to learning. Teachers tell them that students are enjoying many elements of this style of learning. As a result, managers are focusing on developing students' digital skills to enable them to access learning in more flexible ways. They are also developing students' understanding of what the world of work now involves, for example, working remotely from their colleagues and communicating effectively through technology.

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?

Managers have developed a range of flexible approaches to learning. This includes, for example, teaching a group of students in class while remotely teaching the same lesson to students working from home or self-isolating. Managers and teachers acknowledge that this approach needs further refinement as teachers develop a wider range of resources for their students.

Manager and teachers report that students' attendance and participation in remote learning are positive. Students are very willing to learn. However, managers and teachers also acknowledge that most students prefer face-to-face classroom-based teaching. Teachers are mindful that they may have to provide remote learning in the future. Hence, they continue to prepare and plan for such scenarios.

Teachers have spent time establishing students' starting points and carefully assessing their current knowledge and skills before the start of their programme. Teachers found that new students joining academic courses this year lacked essay-writing skills and had limited examination-technique skills. This was because students did not get the same amount of practice in the last academic year due to the cancellation of national examinations. Teachers have put on extra classes for these students to help them to develop and improve their skills.

Managers say that most apprentices have remained in their current employment. Apprentices that were or remain on furlough have continued to develop their knowledge in line with assessors' expectations. Managers have helped those apprentices who were made redundant to find alternative jobs. This has enabled them to continue with their apprenticeship uninterrupted.

Teachers acknowledge the difficulties they face by teaching their students remotely. This includes students' often poor internet connectivity, and digital poverty. To overcome these issues, managers have provided laptops and dongles to those students in need. Teachers have found subjects requiring more in-depth discussion, such as sociology and psychology, more problematic to manage online.

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

Leaders and managers have put in place COVID-19 risk assessments to ensure that campuses are safe for their students and staff. Specialist teams carry out regular welfare checks on all students to ensure that their mental and physical well-being remains positive.

Managers have taken additional measures to ensure that students are safe at the college and online. For example, they have updated the online safety training to include how to monitor and report online issues related to the 'Prevent' duty.

Staff and students on all campuses are very clear about how they can communicate and report any safeguarding issues. For example, there is one single in-box for staff and students to raise any COVID-19 related concerns. Students say that they have detailed information on how to keep themselves safe in person and online.

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