Ada National College for Digital Skills

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	143540
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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

Ada National College for Digital Skills (Ada) was established in September 2016. Its aim is to educate the next generation of digital talent, and to attract more women and under-represented groups into the industry. The college operates out of two campuses in Tottenham Hale and Whitechapel in north east London.

At the time of the visit, there were 155 learners in the sixth form on level 3 study programmes, including A-level and vocational programmes. There were 229 apprentices on standards-based apprenticeship programmes, from level 4 to level 6. Apprentices study foundation degrees alongside their apprenticeship programmes. A small number of learners take GCSE English and mathematics.

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?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have moved the curriculum to an online model for apprenticeships and the sixth form. Leaders did this early in the pandemic. Following the easing of national restrictions, leaders made the decision to move the sixth-form curriculum to partial online learning, with most learning taking place at college. Leaders maintained apprenticeship programmes fully online to reflect the working patterns in the industries in which apprentices work.

Leaders and managers have used the advanced technologies and expertise in the organisation to identify new learning tools and technologies. Managers have trained teachers in using these, so that they can implement the online curriculum in an interesting and interactive way. Prior to lockdown, leaders had upgraded their technology to include more advanced features for learning. Managers ensured that learners had access to laptops, appropriate software and suitable workspaces at home. Leaders and employers have supported learners, many through 'working at home' bursaries, to improve their workspaces at home. A small number of apprentices who have been furloughed have benefited from being able to continue their studies from home and have not had to take a break in learning.

Managers have considered the positive impact of the online curriculum and plan to retain elements, such as chatrooms and online whiteboards, in future learning. They survey learners and tutors to inform their decisions about what works well for them. Managers report that apprentices' attendance has improved since the move to online learning.

Meetings between the board and senior leaders have continued as planned, but are now carried out virtually. The board is informed about the actions taken by senior leaders and has confidence in the decisions that leaders make. The board states that it receives detailed information about the progress of learners and the impact of leaders' actions on the learner experience.

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?

At the time of the college closure due to national restrictions, learners and teachers had high levels of digital skills. Although most teaching prior to the pandemic took place in the classroom setting, they were able to adapt to new online teaching methods. Learners reported little disruption to their learning.

Tutors and employers supported apprentices to complete their work and assessments online. Initially, some sixth-form learners felt isolated from their peers and found it difficult to motivate themselves to work from home. Tutors increased the number of one-to-one meetings with learners to help them to stay on task. These learners have appreciated being able to attend college since national restrictions have been eased.

Managers focus on improving the quality of online teaching. They have sought out new interactive tools so that online learning is interesting and collaborative. Tutors have developed their skills, for example in using chatrooms, hangout rooms, quizzes and digital whiteboards, so that they can use these to improve their teaching.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, learners have continued to receive careers advice and guidance from industry-experienced staff and employers online. Managers and employers have worked together to establish online projects so that

learners continue to develop the skills and behaviours that they need for their future careers. For example, learners develop the technical skills for producing a prototype application and learn how to work in teams and to meet deadlines.

Teachers and managers use a range of indicators to monitor the progress of learners, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, while they are working from home. They identify whether learners complete work within set deadlines and check that completed work is of a high standard.

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

Tutors have maintained a high priority on keeping learners safe online and they build these practices into the digital curriculum. Learners report that they know how to keep themselves safe online, such as how to protect personal information, encryption and how to secure data and networks.

Leaders have maintained the safeguarding practices, including with regard to the 'Prevent' duty, that were in place prior to the pandemic. Staff have continued to attend online training, for example on unconscious bias and safer recruitment.

Leaders identified an increased need to support learners' well-being and some with financial difficulties. Tutors contact learners frequently to check on their work, their mental health and other support needs. There has been an increased number of applications for travel bursaries.

Leaders have focused on staff well-being. They have established frequent meetings and activities so that staff can discuss issues and celebrate their successes. Managers have frequent one-to-one meetings to check on staff well-being.