Babington Business College Limited

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	50586
Name of lead inspector:	Russ Henry, Her Majesty's Inspector
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Type of provider:	Independent learning provider
Address:	1st Floor 100 Broad Street Birmingham B15 1AE

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 in this period, including those 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

Babington Business College holds national contracts for apprenticeships, traineeships and adult skills. Babington's head office is in Birmingham, with local learning centres in Birmingham, Bristol, Derby, Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, Milton Keynes, Nottingham, Sheffield and Stoke-on-Trent. Learners are located throughout the country. With the exception of employability and traineeship programmes, most study is undertaken in the workplace. At the time of the visit, Babington was providing training to around 3,500 apprentices, over 1,000 adult learners and almost 200 trainees. Most apprentices work in accountancy, administration and management roles. Most adult learners were learning employability skills.

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?

Managers quickly moved courses online following the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions in March. The apprenticeship subjects they offer lend themselves readily to remote teaching. Many programmes already incorporated some online learning and managers had planned to increase this. Courses for adults presented a greater challenge as they had previously been taught entirely in classrooms and used printed materials. Managers deployed a team of staff to redevelop these courses, which were launched online within three weeks of the start of restrictions.

Managers worked flexibly to ensure that apprentices, whose daily work was disrupted by COVID-19 restrictions, could continue to meet the requirements of their courses. They worked with employers to ensure that furloughed apprentices continued to have access to the information technology systems that they needed for their studies. They made changes to the sequence of topics so that apprentices who were working on unexpected tasks were supported to learn from them.

Where adult learners did not have access to the technology they needed to complete their studies online, managers provided laptops and tablets for them to use and changed the format of study materials so that they could be accessed on a wider range of devices. Managers adjusted the role of technical support staff so that as well as of supporting staff, they provided a service for learners and employers.

Subcontractor managers adjusted the curriculum of traineeship programmes because trainees were unable to secure work placements during COVID-19 restrictions. Managers added extra training during the summer and moved work placements to September. All current trainees have a work placement.

Because of managers' actions, few learners and apprentices have suffered disruption to their studies. Where they have, for example because they have not been able to devote as much time to studying, managers have arranged additional training and support.

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?

In discussion with employers, managers decided that live online lessons for apprentices should be shorter but more frequent than previous face-to-face workshops. They supported staff to condense teaching without losing important content and encouraged them to make online learning as active as possible. Apprentices report that lessons are interactive, involve all participants and are managed really well by specialist trainers.

Prior to COVID-19 restrictions, apprenticeship staff had often taught remotely. Consequently, managers focused training and support on employability tutors whose teaching had previously been entirely in the classroom. They provided training in the use of webinars, videoconferencing and online assessment.

Staff work flexibly to support apprentices. Where apprentices are made redundant, staff help them to complete their studies. Where work patterns change, staff adjust teaching patterns.

Staff make use of a range of tools to check that learners and apprentices have understood topics and completed tasks. Managers can obtain detailed reports from the electronic portfolio system and intervene when learners are not participating as well as they ought.

Attendance and participation have remained high. Specialist trainers report that the flexibility they have provided and the shortening of lessons have contributed to this. Their teaching has been supported by skills coaches and learner coordinators who have made frequent contact with learners and provided support and encouragement.

Qualified staff offer careers guidance across all programmes. Those apprentices that have been made redundant benefit from sessions on letter and curriculum vitae writing, and interview techniques, including those useful for online interviews.

Members of the quality assurance team observe live online lessons and provide staff with developmental feedback. Managers report that visiting lessons is much easier when they are taught online. Managers review the planning of courses through scrutiny of documents such as schemes of work. They hold weekly meetings to help staff to share good practice.

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

Leaders and managers recognise that the nature of safeguarding risks has changed during the pandemic and have adapted their policies to meet new challenges. They identify online grooming, online radicalisation and mental ill-health as heightened risks. The designated safeguarding lead has undertaken a variety of training on these and other subjects and liaises with a range of external agencies to help keep learners safe. She shares her knowledge with other staff, including through a monthly newsletter.

Learners and employers receive a safeguarding booklet at the start of their programmes. Managers have developed and distributed a further booklet on online safety.

Managers have implemented several communication mechanisms that allow learners to alert staff if they have concerns. These include hand signals, text messaging and a concern form that raises an alert even if it is not completed. The safeguarding team also has an online system for tracking safeguarding matters to ensure that all relevant staff are made aware of any concerns.