

USP College

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	130681
Name of lead inspector:	Penny Fawcus, HMI
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Type of provider:	General further education college
Address:	Runnymede Chase Benfleet Essex SS7 1TW

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

USP College is a large general further education college. In August 2017, Seevic College merged with Palmer's College. The newly merged college is named USP College. It is split across two sites in Essex. One is in Benfleet and one campus is in Grays.

The college provides study programmes and adult learning programmes. At the time of the visit there were 3,405 learners aged 16 to 18 years and 166 adult learners. Over three quarters of learners are enrolled on a level 3 programme. One hundred and forty-five learners are in receipt of high needs funding. USP College has no subcontracted provision.

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 describe the challenge of moving to remote online learning and developing resources to support this. They invested time in auditing their virtual learning environment. They checked that learners had access to remote online learning. Managers provided learners with laptops where necessary. They communicated the plan and provided timetables to parents and learners at the start of national restrictions.

Leaders told us that the COVID-19 restrictions accelerated their existing digital strategy. Staff's digital skills and confidence have improved. They now have live-streaming rooms in all departments, so learners self-isolating can attend their lessons. Staff report that attendance monitoring and following up of absences are priorities at the college.

Leaders and managers have invested time in planning the new academic year. They have worked with schools, learners and parents and introduced online open events and enrolment. Leaders and managers reiterate the need to check that learners are on the right programme, in the absence of external examinations in the summer term. They are confident that they are prepared for any future restrictions to onsite learning.

Managers say they use a range of quality assurance methods to check learners' progress and quality improvement. One example is supportive remote lesson visits by managers. They use their findings to target support for teachers. They have set up weekly online training for teachers to share practice and develop further their remote teaching skills.

Managers report that communication has improved because of the use of online platforms. They say learners are more able to feed back their opinions and contact with parents is better. Staff appreciate the transparent and supportive communication from leaders at this challenging time.

Managers have struggled to find solutions to teaching practical skills and providing work experience opportunities. They planned small-group onsite lessons in the summer for those learners studying practical subjects. They have prioritised practical skills development for onsite lessons in the new academic year. Learners' well-being remains a concern and affects learners' motivation and participation in learning.

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 identify that most programmes are now two thirds face-to-face teaching, and one third online. They make technology available for learners where they have limited or no access at home. Teachers adapt resources, so learners can access them with their smartphones. They provide printed information for those learners who need it.

Teachers have adapted their teaching strategies to suit online learning. They have planned the curriculum in line with restrictions, such as social distancing in stage performances. Teachers have amended assessment methods to make best use of online alternatives.

Managers say they use assessment to establish learners' existing skills and knowledge. They say that staff plan programmes which use assessment to review learners' progress. Staff use these outcomes to set targets for learners to improve.

Learners feel that they have continued to learn during the pandemic. They say that their experience and ability to learn from home relates to their teachers' skills, which have improved since the start of national restrictions. Most learners prefer face-to-face teaching in the college environment. Teachers find it difficult to check the learning of all learners during online classes. They have increased one-to-one contact with learners to help remedy this.

Teachers describe weekly discussions with managers to review learners who are vulnerable or at risk. They agree intervention actions and share information through college systems. Teachers feel that they have a better understanding of how to support learners with high needs because of improved communication.

Teachers report that the use of online media has provided greater opportunities to access employers. Learners on performance-related courses have spent time virtually with a production company in the West End. Learners on business courses have met online with directors of a global social media platform.

Staff continue to provide careers advice and guidance and they have made this a key focus for learners' reviews at the start of the year. They say some learners do not want to progress to higher education and many have changed their career goal because of the pandemic.

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

Learners know how to keep themselves safe in relation to coronavirus. Learner representatives helped plan the safe return to college campuses. Learners talk confidently about the safety restrictions on campus and they adhere to the rules.

Managers say they are proactive in anticipating learners' concerns. They spoke to all vulnerable learners prior to the national restrictions. They checked how they were feeling, and that support was in place with well-being contacts.

Managers sent information to parents about online safety, signs to look out for and who to contact if they had any concerns. Through social media and newsletters, they continue to share safeguarding information with teachers, learners and parents.

Managers state that the profile and accessibility of the safeguarding team has been enhanced because of the pandemic. Teachers highlight their close working relationship with the team. They feel more able to identify vulnerable learners because of the pandemic. College counsellors are trained to offer remote counselling.

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