

United Colleges Group

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	130423
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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 in this period, including those with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

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

United Colleges Group (UCG) is a large general further education college, formed in August 2017 by the merger of the College of North West London and City of Westminster College. The group operates from five sites across London. The largest sites are in Paddington and Willesden. It also has sites in Maida Vale, Wembley and a construction centre in Kings Cross. UCG offers education programmes for young people across a broad range of subjects. There are approximately 8,890 learners. Over 50% of learners are on adult education programmes, and around 40% are on education programmes for young people. The remainder study apprenticeships. There are 307 learners who have 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?

Leaders took the decision in March 2020 to stop face-to-face teaching for the remainder of the academic year for the majority of learners and apprentices. This was due to the COVID-19 risks to their health. As a result, learners and apprentices were taught by tutors and assessors through videoconferences, and by industry professionals through webinars. For example, media learners took part in masterclasses in voice-over techniques from television broadcasters. Learners studying fashion attended webinars on making ruffles.

Leaders and managers changed their approach to teaching in September 2020. Curriculum teams identify which components of programmes should be taught online and which are best taught face-to-face in a classroom or workshop. The majority of learners and apprentices complete approximately half of their studies remotely. Most

learners enjoy this mixed learning experience. However, a few learners would like more time at college.

Leaders and managers work with awarding bodies to make adaptations to the way assessments are completed. They consider how the closure due to COVID-19 restrictions of non-essential services such as hairdressing impact on their learners. For example, hairdressing and beauty therapy learners are ordinarily required to work on clients within a real working environment when undertaking assessments. They are currently allowed to work on each other and on head blocks. Electrical engineering learners have remote presentations from employers as part of their inspection testing assessment.

Leaders and managers have introduced keyworker roles to specifically work with learners and apprentices who were struggling to engage with their programme. They provide mentoring, pastoral, welfare and academic support to learners and apprentices. Learning support assistants help learners during their online classes. Leaders and managers report that this support helps to keep learners and apprentices on their courses and gets them back on track with their studies.

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?

Leaders and managers support learners and apprentices to continue their studies. They give laptops and other accessories to learners and apprentices who do not have these at home. The learning resource centres remain open for extended periods of time to reduce the number of learners and apprentices in communal areas. This provides learners and apprentices with a safe place to study.

Teachers sequence learning so that practical sessions are taught during on-site lessons and the supporting theory is taught through videoconferencing. Tutors create videos of practical tasks for learners to refer to, which supports them to develop their knowledge and make progress. Learners say they can revisit tutors' video resources and worksheets when at home, which helps them understand things better.

Due to COVID-19 national restrictions, managers and tutors adapt the community elements for learners on supported learning programmes. They set up replica shops in the college to replace visits to local shops and cafes that can no longer take place. This supports learners to develop their skills in handling money.

Tutors adapt how they assess what learners have remembered from their lessons. For example, they ask learners to video themselves talking about a topic they have been taught. In construction and engineering, learners create videos to share with tutors to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the calculations used for stress and strain on columns that support ceilings in buildings.

Learners take part in a virtual work experience week that replaces their normal timetable. During this week careers advisors offer face-to-face and videoconference interviews. Learners benefit from industry guest speakers. For example, project engineers give live tours of construction sites using video calls. Health and child care learners receive online sessions with clinical technicians and nurse workers. This helps learners to consider their career pathway and understand the work environment they will go into.

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

Tutors give information to learners and apprentices on the dangers of sharing personal information online, cyber bullying and online scams. Learners and apprentices say they follow the online learning agreement that sets out the expectations staff have on how to behave safely when learning online.

Tutors provide simplified information on COVID-19 safety measures to learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and learners who speak English as an additional language. Tutors use extracts from media sources and government websites and present this information in ways that are easy for learners to understand.

Leaders and managers worked with the safeguarding team to ensure that they had an overview of vulnerable learners' and apprentices' well-being needs. As a result of this work, leaders and managers were able to report an increase in learners and apprentices suffering from poor mental health because of the pandemic. Leaders have changed the roles of some staff so that they provide extra pastoral support to those learners and apprentices who need it.

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