

SMB Group

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Bob Hamp, Her Majesty's Inspector

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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.

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

SMB Group was formed in February 2020 from the merger of Stephenson and Brooksby Melton colleges. The college offers a broad range of vocational routes, including in agriculture, animal care, equine, sport, performing arts, health and social care, engineering and construction. The college has three campuses with over 4,000 students enrolled on a range of learning programmes from entry level to level 7. SMB Group works with three subcontractors and around 1,800 employers and has several partnerships with large national employers across the UK. The majority of study programme students study at level 3. Over 1,300 apprentices are in learning, and the majority are aged 16 to 18. The college caters for residential students through on-site residential provision and lodgings with host families.

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 closed campuses in response to COVID-19 restrictions and directed lecturers to teach courses online. They provided guidance and support to help students study remotely. Following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, leaders identified a return to business as usual as the major priority for lecturers and students.

All lecturers worked together through collaborative networks to exploit new and existing technologies to support students' progress. As students returned to college, lecturers and progress coaches identified individual learning needs through detailed assessments. This resulted in the re-sequencing of learning programmes to allow students to catch up or get back on track.

Leaders and managers prioritised vulnerable students for a swift return to the classroom. They monitored and reinforced safeguarding arrangements and ensured that mental health awareness and online safety were delivered early in the curriculum. Staff timetable learning sessions carefully to ensure that no student is on site if this is not needed.

Among the first to return to college were students who needed to complete practical assessments to continue onto the next stage of their course. Managers prioritised early completion of practical training due to the possibility of further COVID-19 restrictions. Good relationships with employers meant that employers are engaged and ready to help students' progress. For example, two companies have videoed practical tasks for learners to use online as part of their programme of study.

Leaders launched a virtual staffroom, where lecturers collaborate and develop a consistent approach to online learning. They have identified an online learning platform to be used to by all lecturers and students. This will be the focus of future professional development. Leaders agree that one of the positive aspects of the pandemic has been the accelerated move to online learning.

All students have access to online careers information, advice and guidance. New students are able to attend virtual open days, where they watch videos of campus facilities and are introduced to lecturers.

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?

Lecturers and progress coaches focused on supporting students to continue their studies online. This included the delivery of virtual classroom sessions. Lecturers describe how these sessions improved over time as they mastered basic features of online delivery and progressed to more advanced functions that allowed sessions to become more effective.

In support of these developments, lead practitioners created banks of resources focused on knowledge and understanding, and introduced suitable online assessment methods. Lecturers report a more collective approach to the development of online learning through the sharing of good practice across departments.

Managers are convinced that online learning and face-to-face delivery will continue and become more harmonious. For example, a lecturer used video technology to deliver a live session to students from the countryside. In performing arts, in the absence of an audience, students' performances are recorded and then critiqued by their peers.

Managers recognise the important digital skills developed through online learning for all levels and across all programmes. For example, sports students record podcasts

on topics as a way of demonstrating their knowledge and understanding. Lecturers refer to the confidence gained when communicating with others during online sessions and how this helps to prepare students for their final professional discussions.

Managers conduct virtual learning walks for online classes to identify good practice and ensure classes are conducted appropriately. They report the use of learner voice to ensure teaching is effective. Lecturers describe the added value of online data collection when using communications technology that gives a clear picture of student participation and success.

Leaders state that attendance has remained at similar levels to the last academic year. Students confirm that the move to online learning has been more enjoyable than expected.

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

During the pandemic, leaders focused on ensuring that all students were supported and safe. They ensured that lecturers and progress coaches made frequent contact with vulnerable students and that action was taken to check on their welfare.

Students report that they know what to do if they have concerns, and some recall a social media campaign during the pandemic reinforcing the role of student services in supporting student well-being.

Leaders and managers continue to ensure that they and their staff meet statutory safeguarding requirements. For example, they have refresher 'Prevent' duty training and have responded to an increase in mental health issues through mental health awareness training.

COVID-19-related safety was covered with students prior to returning to college. This helped to reduce anxiety and, as a result, students feel safe going to college. They refer to numerous strategies put in place to keep them safe, such as hand sanitising, wearing of masks, separate toilets and one-way systems.

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