

Richmond upon Thames College

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector:	Peter Nelson, Her Majesty's Inspector
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Address:	Langhorn Drive Twickenham Middlesex TW2 7SJ

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 students 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

Richmond upon Thames College is a general further education college based in the London Borough of Richmond. The college offers a range of academic and vocational courses. The vast majority of students study vocational routes through 16 to 19 study programmes. The college also offers adult programmes, apprenticeships and discrete programmes to students in receipt of high-needs funding.

The college attracts students from a wide geographical area. Hounslow is the most popular borough for recruitment. At the time of the visit, the college provided education and training to 2,105 students aged 16 to 18, 351 adults and 120 apprentices.

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?

Around the time of the original COVID-19 restrictions, staff had just started the process of moving in to a newly-constructed building. Staff were able to use this period to complete the move to the new accommodation. They implemented appropriate risk assessment and safety measures, so that more vulnerable students could continue attending the college in person, while the teaching for most students moved online.

Managers have issued around 250 laptops to support those students who would otherwise be unable to study online. Staff have received support and training to help them develop their online teaching skills. This has helped them become increasingly confident to teach using online learning techniques.

Staff from local partner organisations, including employers, the university and the local chamber of commerce speak positively about how helpful staff at the college have been during the restrictions. For example, staff at the college supported a group of engineering apprentices who were made redundant due to COVID-19. They helped them find alternative employment, or secure a place at university, so they could continue with their careers. Managers also responded to a request from the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board to develop and launch a new design and drafting course which commenced in September.

Leaders and managers have maintained a constructive partnership with managers from another further education college. This has enabled staff to discuss appropriate and effective contingency measures, in response to COVID-19 restrictions.

The COVID-19 restrictions have not adversely affected enrolment numbers for the current academic year. The proportion of students aged 16 to 19 has increased significantly this year, particularly on A-level programmes. Managers have also introduced a range of new courses in response to local demand. For example, they have set up a series of two-week employability courses, in partnership with the local job centre, in response to an increase in unemployment locally.

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?

Prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, curriculum leaders worked to adapt courses, so teaching could move online during the restrictions. In June 2020, leaders reopened the college so that many students, particularly those on practical and skill-based programmes, could return to college to complete practical skills elements and assessments. Since June, teachers have combined online and face-to-face teaching. Around half the students attend the college at any one time, while others work remotely.

Many teachers have changed how they assess learners and the frequency of that assessment, so they can gain a clear understanding of any gaps in learners' knowledge or development, taking action where necessary. For example, many sports students lost physical fitness during the restrictions. Teachers have adapted the programme to help students regain their fitness. Similarly, accountancy students have attended intensive workshops at college to catch up with course components that were difficult to teach online.

Many apprentices have been particularly affected over the past few months, primarily due to being furloughed. As a result, assessors were unable to carry out any work-based assessment. Assessors have had to find alternative ways of supporting apprentices. For example, in business administration, they have established a peer support network between apprentices to maintain morale, and assist apprentices get back on track.

Teachers and students recognise some of the benefits of the current mix of online and face-to-face teaching. For example, due to smaller class sizes, teachers state that behaviour has improved, and that students make quicker progress as they receive more support. Students feel that teachers support them particularly well, both in lessons and online.

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

Leaders have placed a strong emphasis on initiatives to promote the well-being and safety of staff and students during the restrictions. They have compiled additional guidance on safety and welfare, which they issued to staff, students and parents. This guidance carefully explains the social distancing and hygiene measures for those working at the college. It also outlines additional safety considerations associated with teaching and learning online.

Staff make frequent contact with students to check on their emotional well-being. Managers provide additional counselling and support services for those students who experience increased levels of anxiety. Leaders have recently appointed additional emotional well-being tutors as part of the college's membership of the mental health trailblazer.

Leaders have arranged events for staff, including a well-being day. They have also provided training and workshops, including how to maintain positive mental health, safe working from home, mindfulness and yoga.

Learners feel safe around the campus, and when working online. They know who to contact if they have any concerns about their welfare or safety.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
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