

Abacus Training Group

Interim visit report

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Type of provider: Independent Learning Provider

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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

Abacus Training Group (Abacus) is a privately-owned training provider established in 2008. The head office is based in Newhaven, near Brighton. Training takes place in London, Luton and Essex in employers' premises or in other commercial settings such as salons. Abacus currently offers level 3 courses in beauty therapy treatments, to adults using advanced learner loans.

At the time of the visit, 30 learners were studying at Abacus. Just over half of the learners were studying courses in nail technology. The rest of the learners were almost equally split between courses in beauty therapy treatments, massage and make-up artistry.

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?

At the time of the first period of COVID-19 national restrictions, learners were due to take the final practical assessments for their courses. Leaders decided to pause lessons until learners could return to learning safely. Leaders did not enrol any new learners until September.

Leaders provided learners with links to online resources they could use if they wanted to continue with their learning remotely. Leaders set up 'chat' groups for teachers and learners to keep in touch with each other and check on everyone's well-being.

Leaders told us they were better prepared to support learners during the second period of national restrictions. They now use videoconferencing software to interview prospective learners. Teachers and learners use an online learning platform where teachers upload resources and recordings of practical lessons. This allows learners who are self-isolating or cannot attend lessons for other reasons to continue with their courses. Leaders said they will continue using online technologies beyond the current circumstances of the pandemic.

Leaders provided training for teachers on the use of the virtual learning platform and videoconferencing tools. Teachers told us that they benefited from sessions on how to engage with learners remotely and how to help learners complete reflective journals online. Teachers supported learners to make sure they had the right equipment and skills they needed for remote learning.

Leaders reported an increased interest in their courses since the start of the pandemic, particularly for nail technology. Leaders told us they have established more thorough processes for assessing the suitability of prospective learners. They told us that they assure themselves that new learners are committed to working in the industry. Leaders check that applicants understand the safety measures in place for practical lessons and check applicants' access and ability to use technology prior to enrolling them on courses.

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?

Learners spoke about how they learn theory remotely and develop their practical skills in face-to-face lessons. They illustrated how this way of learning was particularly successful when describing the theory and practice of galvanic facial treatments.

Teachers reported that they now check on learning more frequently at the start of lessons. Teachers make sure learners have completed and understood the preparatory work they have done remotely. Teachers have adapted homework activities to resemble examination questions more closely and help learners prepare in the event of further national restrictions.

Teachers described how leaders review online resources and use observations of face-to-face lessons to check on the quality of teaching and learners' progress. Teachers value the ease of access to leaders to discuss the progress and well-being of learners.

Teachers have adapted their teaching of practical skills to take account of the current safety measures. Learners practise beauty treatments on each other, use role-play activities or practise on plastic hands and feet. Teachers highlighted that not being able to practise on external clients is preventing learners from developing the real-life experience of working with the general public.

Teachers report that learners are attending lessons and participating well in their learning. They told us that learners are focused, enthusiastic and motivated. They attribute these positive attitudes to a greater appreciation for education as a result of the pandemic.

Learners said that they felt they were making progress and becoming more competent in carrying out beauty treatments. Learners explained how their course was helping them to become more confident and motivated to improve their employment prospects, especially for those who had recently lost their jobs.

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

Leaders told us that they identified the risks to learners that could increase while they were not attending lessons, such as domestic violence and financial pressures on their families. Leaders provided learners with details of websites and local services they could use if they were affected by these issues.

Leaders described risks to learners specific to the beauty industry, such as the use of social media to generate business. Teachers described how they teach learners to keep safe online, including how to use social media safely to showcase their work.

Teachers and learners spoke about the safeguarding training they receive. Teachers explained that, as a result of this training, they feel more confident in spotting the signs of mental health and anxiety issues. Learners described completing online modules on safeguarding topics such as the 'Prevent' duty, online safety, and equality and diversity. Learners said that they feel safe within the organisation.

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