

Fashion Retail Academy

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	57839
Name of lead inspector:	Gayle Saundry, Her Majesty's Inspector
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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.

Information about the provider

The Fashion Retail Academy (the academy) is a college with charitable status. Opened in 2005 as a joint venture between the government and the fashion retail industry, its mission is to develop and inspire talent for a specialist career in fashion retail. At the time of the visit, 1,087 learners were studying full-time courses from level 2 to level 4, the majority of whom were aged 16 to 19. The academy also teaches 143 apprentices, the majority of whom are completing standards in retailing and wholesale, and administration. In October 2020, the academy introduced traineeships, and is currently training a pilot group of 11 learners.

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 continue to work with retail industry professionals during what is a turbulent time in the sector. They recently conducted focus groups to understand how COVID-19 has affected their businesses and therefore their requirements for future employees. Leaders used the insights they gained to re-structure their curriculum. They now teach multidisciplinary projects rather than separate units. These enable learners to develop new knowledge, skills and professional behaviours in a way that more closely reflects how industry professionals work. Leaders have also added to the range of courses they offer by introducing a traineeship programme, which they intend to make a key part of their offer in the future.

When the academy was closed, leaders recognised the importance of setting learners practical work that would not disadvantage those who do not have access to specialist equipment, such as a sewing machine, at home. Teachers sent garment-manufacturing learners quarter-size wooden figures, pattern paper and fabric, so that they could complete their practical work by hand-pinning and hand-sewing garments. Leaders also provided a laptop to any learner who did not have access to one, to ensure they could attend lessons online.

Leaders recognise that they are unlikely to be able to run their usual work-experience placements this year due to the pandemic. Instead, they have worked with industry partners to create a new 21-day industry experience programme. Learners will have the opportunity to spend four days working on site with a partner brand, after which they will be assigned an industry mentor who will invite them to join key meetings online to see tools such as critical path analyses used in practice. Industry partners continue to provide learners with careers guidance through online talks and career case 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 saw the COVID-19 restrictions as an opportunity to explore new course content and ways of teaching. For instance, they introduced a greater curriculum focus on the ways in which industry professionals work together online, by teaching learners about industry-specific buying software and digital 3-D design tools.

Teachers report that they were able to make a smooth transition from face-to-face to online teaching at the start of national COVID-19 restrictions. This process was made easier as apprenticeship staff were already teaching online and were able to share their expertise with colleagues.

Teachers have adapted the way they teach and assess their learners. For example, teachers encourage retail display learners to photograph window displays and work together to critique the work of industry professionals. As fashion learners are unable to attend fashion shows, teachers instead provide learners with online access, for instance to the kimono exhibition at the V&A Museum.

Learners now submit a far greater proportion of their work via reflective blogs, video content and electronic portfolios, which form a body of online work that learners can use when applying for jobs. Teachers also do mock online interviews and assessment centres with learners to prepare them for making applications. Final-year learners at level 4 are to be allocated an industry mentor to support them in their preparation to transition into work.

Apprenticeship teachers report that they successfully enabled the relatively high proportion of apprentices who were furloughed to make progress towards their final assessments. Teachers taught apprentices more of the theoretical components of their course to enable them to continue to develop new knowledge and skills. Learners studying English and mathematics qualifications used their time during furlough to develop their knowledge in these subjects.

Leaders confirm that attendance and engagement have broadly remained high this year, including during the period of online teaching. However, they recognise that the attendance of learners on level 2 programmes was lower and this remains an area of focus.

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

Leaders have adapted the way in which they support learners by providing access to counselling, coaching and broader support online as well as in person. They have noted an increase in demand for these services, with some learners experiencing anxiety and low mood during the pandemic. Teachers have taught lessons on managing anxiety and have shared top tips each week with learners, who feel well supported by the team.

Leaders have created a 'netiquette' guide to online behaviour, which includes rules for staying safe online and tips for creating a professional online presence that promotes learners' work while maintaining personal boundaries.

Leaders have put in place measures such as social distancing, and advised learners on how to travel to college safely. They made calls to all new learners to introduce themselves, explain the support available to them, and to identify any early signs of concern to which they can respond.

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