

# Activate Learning

Monitoring visit report

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<b>Unique reference number:</b>	10196504
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<b>Inspection dates:</b>	28 and 29 September 2021
<b>Type of provider:</b>	General further education college
<b>Address:</b>	Oxpens Road Oxford Oxfordshire OX1 1SA

## Monitoring visit: main findings

### Context and focus of visit

In April 2019, the three colleges that formed the Guildford College Group – Guildford College, Farnham College and Merrist Wood College – merged with Activate Learning. In the most recent inspections before the merger, Activate Learning had been rated as good, while the Guildford College Group were judged to require improvement.

This monitoring visit took place to review and evaluate the progress that governors, leaders and staff have made to establish the strategic priorities and address weaknesses in the quality of provision in the predecessor colleges.

Activate Learning operates from seven main campuses located at Oxford, Reading, Guildford, Worplesdon, Farnham, Bracknell and Banbury, spread across three counties.

At the time of the monitoring visit, there were around 16,000 learners across the group, with roughly half at the City of Oxford College and Reading campuses, and around a quarter at the Guildford and Farnham campuses.

### Themes

**What progress have senior leaders, managers and governors made in bringing together the colleges, establishing a shared vision, mission and values, and identifying an appropriate curriculum for the communities they serve?**

**Significant progress**

Leaders, managers and governors have effectively aligned the strategic priorities and management structure for the group, while maintaining the local identities of each of the different campuses. They have ensured each campus provides for the particular needs and priorities of each region.

Leaders, managers and governors have worked well with a broad range of organisations, including chambers of commerce, employers, schools and local enterprise partnerships. They have used feedback astutely to ensure the curriculum meets the needs of stakeholders and the communities they serve.

Leaders and managers promote high aspirations and expectations for all staff and learners. They are relentless in their drive to improve the quality of learning and the learning environments. Managers and staff ensure that every aspect of their work contributes fully to supporting learners to succeed.

Leaders and managers have involved staff effectively in planning the curriculum. Tutors value the opportunities leaders have created to enable them to work collaboratively across campuses. Managers and tutors share plans for learning, resources and good practice, ensuring that the quality of education is high.

**How effective have senior leaders and governors been in establishing an appropriate governing board that has suitable expertise to influence the group's strategic decision-making and support staff to improve the quality of education?**

**Significant progress**

Governance arrangements are robust and highly effective. Governors are particularly effective in ensuring that the college is led and managed well. College leaders benefit from the governors' wide range of skills and experience in education and business that ensures the board can fulfil its function and carry out its responsibilities effectively. Governors undertake a wide range of relevant training that enhances their ability to undertake their role successfully.

Governors know the college very well. They are committed to supporting leaders to implement the ambitious strategic vision of providing excellent teaching and learning, particularly for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Governors scrutinise closely and very effectively the performance of the college, drawing on their extensive commercial and educational expertise. Governors are unflinching in their pursuit of improving areas of concern, such as apprenticeships.

Governors participate effectively in deep dive activities in areas such as apprenticeships, safeguarding and underperforming curriculum areas. They focus on the pace of actions taken by leaders and managers to bring about improvements. Governors recently completed a deep dive in culture, diversity and inclusivity. Informative feedback provided to the board identified the impact of actions taken to embed equality and inclusion across the college.

Governors routinely review their skill set. They use the results to identify the skills gaps, which informs their recruitment plans for new governors. Governors also have a rigorous succession plan in place. They use these plans to inform priorities for forthcoming appointments. Governors have recently appointed a governor with significant experience and skills in the delivery of online learning and digital technologies to replace a retiring governor.

Governors support student governors to understand what governance is and how the knowledge, skills and behaviours they develop will link to their future career aspirations and develop their confidence to contribute in meetings.

**What impact have leaders and managers had in supporting teachers to improve their teaching and assessment practice, enabling learners and apprentices to develop appropriate knowledge and skills, and to make progress? Reasonable progress**

Leaders have worked effectively with staff to improve their understanding of financial planning and curriculum design. As a result, managers ensure the financial viability of each course when planning their curriculum. Leaders identified inconsistencies in the funding for high needs learners in comparison to other colleges in the county. They have successfully negotiated an increase in funding which enables them to expand the curriculum for learners. For example, speech and language therapies are now offered and, where appropriate, technology is used to engage learners across campuses.

Senior leaders have successfully implemented training and support for staff to promote the development of their teaching, leadership and digital skills. This is valued highly by staff who take responsibility for their development and improved career progression opportunities. For example, learning support assistants have progressed to tutors and undertake teacher training. Teachers have become increasingly reflective, confident and enthusiastic in trying out new approaches to motivate their learners to succeed. This has contributed to sustained improvement in the effectiveness of teaching.

Most teachers have benefitted from a six-week coaching programme and access to digital support champions. This has helped them become more confident to use digital technology, such as 'Padlet', in lessons to check and recap learners' knowledge and understanding. Mathematics learners who speak English as an additional language benefit from interactive quizzes that test the development of their numeracy, reading and speaking skills. Tutors confidently cascade their learning to their peers.

The training for apprenticeship tutors has enabled them to use techniques such as interleaving to help apprentices remember more. Tutors effectively check apprentices' ability to recall key concepts at planned points in their programme using practice papers and workplace scenarios. Apprenticeship coaches have had useful support to develop their assessing skills, which has helped apprentices prepare for their end-point assessments.

Tutors support learners well to produce work at an expected standard for their A-level studies. Tutors check learners' work frequently. Feedback is detailed and helpful. Therefore, learners understand how they can improve their work. However, tutors do not consistently reinforce feedback. Consequently, some second-year learners continue to make basic written errors, such as inappropriate use of capital letters.

Tutors and assessors do not ensure apprentices receive sufficient feedback to enable them to improve their written work. As a result, they do not improve their work and repeatedly make simple grammatical errors.

**What progress have senior leaders and managers made in ensuring learners achieve their qualifications, including English and mathematics, and that apprentices are supported to complete and achieve their apprenticeships?**

**Reasonable progress**

Managers monitor learners' progress well and intervene swiftly to address any concerns. They have successfully established centralised reporting that provides oversight of learners' progress. They make effective use of learners' information to plan learning, track and monitor progress and support strategies. Staff diligently maintain comprehensive records about their learners, including their support needs and targets.

Staff are clear about their personal targets, including raising learners' attendance and punctuality rates. They swiftly identify concerns and take prompt action; for example, they contact absent learners. If appropriate, they communicate concerns to parents or external agencies with responsibility for the learner. Consequently, attendance and punctuality have improved for most learners. Most learners who complete their courses, for instance in A-level art and design, achieve high grades.

Leaders have improved the management of and reporting on apprenticeship programmes. This enables them to effectively monitor the progress of apprentices. They have introduced targets for tutors and coaches to improve the retention and achievement of apprentices. However, it is too early to judge the impact. Managers review the progress of apprentices monthly and put in place interventions to support apprentices to catch up. Leaders and the apprenticeship link governor report the impact of improvement strategies to governors. However, achievement rates for some apprentices remain low.

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