

# United Colleges Group

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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**Name of lead inspector:** Sue Hasty, Her Majesty's Inspector

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**Type of provider:** General further education college

**Address:** 25 Paddington Green  
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## Monitoring visit: main findings

### Context and focus of visit

United Colleges Group (UCG) was inspected in December 2019. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in addressing the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

UCG is a large general further education college, formed in August 2017 by the merger of the College of North West London (CNWL) and City of Westminster College (CWC). The group operates from five campuses across London. The largest campuses are in Paddington and Willesden. Other campuses are in Maida Vale and Wembley, and there is a construction skills centre in King's Cross.

UCG offers education programmes for young people, adult learners, apprentices and learners with high needs across a broad range of subject sector areas. At the time of the monitoring visit, there were 3,386 learners aged 16–19 on study programmes. The largest subject areas are in English, mathematics and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), followed by business, construction, science, health and social care, and information communication and technology (ICT) courses.

### Themes

**How much progress have leaders made in providing appropriate training for middle managers for education programmes for young people so that they know how to improve their curriculum areas?**

**Reasonable progress**

Since the previous inspection, senior leaders have carefully evaluated and adapted the roles and responsibilities of the middle management team. Leaders have increased the number of curriculum managers and have given managers more time each week to focus on improving the quality of education in their departments.

Senior leaders have put in place appropriate training to enable managers to develop the knowledge and skills they need for their new responsibilities. New managers value highly the coaching they have received. They report that it has helped them to develop the skills they need to tackle management issues, such as having difficult conversations with colleagues.

Middle managers report that the training they have received has enabled them to think through better ways of improving their curriculum plans. For example, in English, managers have changed the order in which they teach knowledge content,

allowing learners better opportunities to practise speaking and reading English earlier in the course. They have found that, as a result, learners gain confidence when they pass their speaking examination within the first few months of their course.

As a result of the training they have received, managers have put in place appropriate steps to review the quality of the content of their curriculum each year. For example, they talk to learners, teachers and employers to check that learners develop the skills necessary for their next steps. They use the information they gain to good effect. For instance, on ICT courses, teachers now include topics on cybersecurity to better prepare learners for careers in the ICT sector.

In most subjects, managers across campuses have started to work more closely together to monitor their curriculum. Where this is not the case, managers do not routinely discuss the content and sequencing of the curriculum or the quality of teaching with their colleagues. Consequently, in a few subjects, managers have a limited understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in their curriculum area.

**To what extent do teachers on education programmes for young people plan and teach a curriculum for learners that is challenging? How well do learners recall and apply the new knowledge they have learned and achieve their expected outcomes?**

**Reasonable progress**

Most curriculum managers have now put in place suitably developed curriculum plans. For example, on plumbing courses, staff start by teaching learners the knowledge of health and safety precautions they need to work safely in workshops. Teachers then work effectively together to teach the curriculum so that learners apply the theory learned earlier in the week to the practical lessons later in the week. As a result, learners develop new knowledge and are able to complete tasks such as using a press fit and crimping gun. In most subjects, learners' achievement of their vocational qualifications has improved since the previous inspection.

Teachers on ESOL courses plan thoughtfully a curriculum for learners newly arrived to the country. They start with speaking and listening skills, such as how to ask and reply to questions. Teachers choose appropriate topics that help learners settle well into the UK, such as familiarisation with healthcare services.

Where curriculum planning is less effective, managers and teachers do not have a clear understanding of why topics are taught in a particular order. This results in teachers of science teaching more complex theories first before teaching basic concepts. Consequently, learners' understanding of these topics is superficial.

The extent to which leaders have put in place a challenging curriculum differs between subjects. In media, for example, teachers stretch learners to consider the message and tone they want to communicate in their final marketing projects. However, in some subjects, teachers give learners work that is not challenging enough or is not at the right level for them. For example, learners on level 3

business courses spend too much time completing simple tasks such as word searches. In science courses, learners struggle to recall fluently knowledge taught earlier in the course and so are not well prepared for their next stage of education. For a few learners on ESOL for mathematics courses, the content is too difficult.

**What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that assessors and teachers improve how they develop learners' and apprentices' knowledge of English and mathematics, so that they achieve their qualifications?**

**Reasonable progress**

Leaders and managers check appropriately how teachers improve learners' knowledge of English and mathematics. Managers have put appropriate support in place to help teachers of vocational subjects to develop their skills in teaching English and mathematics. For example, teachers attend English and mathematics lessons with their learners so that they gain a greater understanding of what learners need to improve on. However, learners' achievement of English and mathematics qualifications remains too low.

In most subjects, teachers choose suitable content to develop learners' knowledge of mathematics. For example, teachers of science teach learners how to apply basic mathematics to solve electrical circuit problems. On carpentry and plumbing courses, learners develop the skills they need to accurately measure the lengths of materials and create angles according to instructions. Most learners on ESOL for mathematics courses learn the words they need to tackle problems, including calculating fractions, decimals and percentages.

Managers recognise that in a few vocational subjects, teachers do not teach well enough the knowledge of English that learners need in order to be successful. In these instances, teachers do not ensure that learners understand and use the correct technical vocabulary for the subject. In a few cases, while teachers point out errors in spelling and punctuation, they do not always help learners to correct these. Consequently, learners continue to make the same mistakes.

A few learners do not find their English lessons helpful. For some learners, the English they learn is too basic, and in a small minority of instances, learners do not receive any feedback on their work. As a result, learners' progress in improving their knowledge is slow.

**How much progress have leaders and teachers made in improving learners' attendance and punctuality?**

**Reasonable progress**

Since the previous inspection, leaders have put in place appropriate strategies to improve learners' attendance. For example, learners who reach the college's target

attendance level receive a financial reward. Teachers send work to learners who are self-isolating so that learners can attend lessons online and do not fall behind.

Leaders and teachers have newly put in place a software system that allows them to track attendance more closely. As a result, teachers can better identify learners with poor attendance. They hold meetings with these learners and their parents and carers to set targets for improved attendance.

Learners receive useful additional one-to-one help from teachers where they have fallen behind because of the pandemic. Consequently, learners keep on track with their studies.

While learners' attendance on most courses has improved slightly, it is still not consistently good enough across all subjects. In a minority of lessons, some learners do not arrive on time. Teachers challenge learners appropriately when this happens.

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