

Inspection of United Colleges Group

Inspection dates:

22 to 25 November 2022

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education	Requires improvement
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Requires improvement
Education programmes for young people	Requires improvement
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Information about this provider

United Colleges Group (UCG) is a large general further education college, formed in August 2017 by the merger of the College of North West London and City of Westminster College. 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 teaches a broad range of courses from entry level up to level 6. Many learners, including one third of young learners at the college, start at entry level or level 1 and come from vulnerable backgrounds. The largest subject areas in the college are English, mathematics and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Other large subject areas include construction, engineering, health and social care, business and information communication and technology courses.

At the time of the inspection, there were 9,152 learners enrolled at the college. This included 3,472 learners on education programmes for young people and 4,876 learners on adult learning programmes. A substantial proportion of the adult learning provision was in ESOL courses.

UCG provides standards-based apprenticeship programmes and a small number of

framework apprenticeships from levels 2 to 4 and at level 6 for 469 apprentices. A large proportion of apprentices complete levels 2 and 3 refrigeration and heat pump engineering technician, electrotechnical trades and construction apprenticeships.

There were 335 learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities who have education, health and care plans and who are in receipt of high-needs funding. Of these, 147 learners study within the discrete high-needs provision, 29 are on supported internship programmes and the remainder study vocational programmes across the college.

At the time of the inspection, the college worked with seven subcontractors.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Leaders have created a calm and orderly environment for learning. Learners have access to quiet learning zones across all campuses for independent learning and self-study. They demonstrate good conduct and behaviours in lessons, communal areas and at work. Most learners arrive at lessons prepared to learn and focus well on the tasks that teachers set for them. Learners are respectful towards their teachers and each other.

The experience of learners is not consistently good enough across the college. The quality of education that learners experience varies considerably depending on the programme they study. The curriculum is not sufficiently challenging in many areas, including in A levels, English for young learners, functional skills, mathematics, ESOL and health and social care. At times, young learners repeat work they have already done or find that their work is too easy.

Learners are motivated and have a positive attitude to their studies. They highly value learning in industry-standard facilities, including art and design studios and sensory and sanctuary spaces for learners with high needs. Leaders have invested in resources such as an industry-standard mixing desk to ensure music learners can combine live composition with digital recording techniques. Consequently, learners develop new skills and knowledge essential for success in these sectors.

The attendance and punctuality of young learners are not good enough. Staff do not set consistently clear expectations for standards of attendance and punctuality. In too many lessons, learners arrive late which causes disruptions to teaching. In some areas, such as refrigeration apprenticeships and high-needs provision, learners' attendance is high. In other areas, teachers build the importance of punctuality into their curriculum. For example, public services teachers lead discussions about the importance of punctuality in the role of a protection officer and the potential risk to their clients' safety should an officer be late. Adult learners on these courses attend well and are punctual.

Staff provide learners with helpful advice and guidance on their future careers. As a result, learners are clear about their next steps and the opportunities available to them. Learners with high needs participate in the mini-jobs programme and complete paid jobs within the college. This helps learners to develop work skills and feel confident and suitably prepared to start their supported internships at large employers.

Staff support learners to apply to university and provide them with advice on different career options. For instance, staff ensure that apprentices on electro-technical and refrigeration programmes know about the range of engineering specialisms and management roles in other sectors. Most apprentices and learners who complete their courses progress to higher education or sustained employment.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders have developed a broad curriculum offer that is well focused on the sectors of construction and engineering, creative industries, health and social care, digital technologies and green skills. These priorities align well with UCG's local and regional skills needs.

Leaders work closely with various stakeholders and partners, such as Greater London Authority and Business London, to ensure their curriculum meets local and regional skills needs. For example, leaders run supported internships for learners with high needs across different boroughs and provide sector-based work academy programmes for unemployed adults in construction, public services and digital industries in conjunction with their local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions.

Leaders have developed good links with key employers and a wide range of other stakeholders in most priority sectors with skills shortages and significant growth opportunities. They have identified opportunities to collaborate on various local and regional initiatives. For example, UGC collaborates with High Speed Two to develop tunnelling courses and apprenticeships across a range of construction and engineering occupations where there are skills gaps.

Leaders have invested carefully in the physical and staff resources needed to teach their curriculum. For example, they have worked productively with the local authority and employers to develop a state-of-the-art training facility to deliver training in green skills. Here, learners can gain valuable skills in topics such as electric vehicle charging, greywater recycling and heat pump installation. Consequently, residents now can train and prepare for jobs in green industries.

Leaders engage well with a variety of stakeholders at a strategic level to develop the curriculum offer. However, they do not consistently involve employers and other relevant stakeholders in the design and implementation of the curriculum. For example, employers are not sufficiently involved in developing the curriculum in health and social care and digital skills. Consequently, learners do not develop sufficient knowledge of emerging developments and innovative ways of working within these sectors.

Leaders engage well with employers in construction, engineering and performing arts to inform the curriculum content and gain information on emerging technologies within these sectors. They have also developed a positive partnership with a prestigious theatre company that offers highly valuable enrichment opportunities for drama and performing arts learners.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Since the previous inspection, leaders have taken action to improve the quality of their provision. They have put in place sensible measures to improve management accountability. They have also implemented a comprehensive training and development strategy for staff to improve the quality of their performance. However, it is too early to see the impact of these changes on the overall quality of education experienced by learners.

Leaders have struggled to recruit and retain teachers and managers, particularly in business, computing, engineering and education programmes for learners with high needs. As a result, in these areas, the quality of education provided to learners is greatly affected. For example, in the discrete provision for learners with high needs, newly recruited teachers, and learning support assistants who lead teaching sessions, have limited experience in working with learners with special education needs and/or disabilities. They are not sufficiently experienced in selecting suitable teaching approaches that work best for learners with complex high needs. As a result, learners' individual needs are not fully met.

In education programmes for young people, too many learners do not achieve their qualifications. However, learners with high needs achieve well. Leaders have put in place suitable plans to improve learner outcomes. For example, in level 3 computing, staff have introduced earlier and more frequent formative assessments to promptly identify and resolve gaps in learners' knowledge. However, the impact of these actions is not yet visible on learners' progress.

Leaders have successfully worked with staff to improve the sequencing of each curriculum. For example, in GCSE English, teachers sequence the curriculum logically to help learners develop their writing and analytical skills incrementally. Learners learn the critical skill of inference first and then move on to evaluation and synthesis. In refrigeration apprenticeships, apprentices first learn how to attach and use pressure gauges before moving on to pipework and changing components. Consequently, learners and apprentices build on their knowledge and skills over time.

Most learners benefit from a broad curriculum which enables them to develop the essential knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to progress to higher education or employment. For example, in ESOL for adults, staff have included employability skills, such as interview preparation, rights at work and problem-solving, alongside their core curriculum. Consequently, ESOL learners develop confidence in communicating within the workplace and the local community and are better prepared for work,

Leaders have designed curriculums which help apprentices build the knowledge and skills they need for their jobs. For example, electro-technical apprentices learn about different safety aspects, such as safe isolation, which they use daily. In drylining and carpentry workshops, apprentices learn to use industry-specific tools and techniques

which apprentices apply at work to complete tasks and to prepare to take on greater levels of responsibility.

In discrete provision for learners with high needs, including in supported internships, teachers lack sufficient understanding of suitable teaching approaches that work best with learners with high needs. In too many lessons, learners spend more time completing worksheets than developing their skills and knowledge. Furthermore, learners cannot access therapists on all sites. Consequently, the quality of appropriate teaching and support for learners on these courses varies considerably.

Learners with high needs in mainstream provision are well supported. Teachers and learning support assistants work effectively to enable learners with learning difficulties and medical and sensory needs to participate in learning and make progress. Staff make appropriate adjustments so that all learners can access courses. For example, in media, staff changed an assignment from an audio presentation to a visual display so that learners with a hearing impairment could take part.

Across the college, teachers are inconsistent in how well they use appropriate techniques to teach learners new knowledge. For example, in English, teachers use retrieval practice well to help young learners remember language features. However, they do not follow up with suitable opportunities to apply these features to help learners remember what they have been taught. In other subjects, such as mathematics, media and computing, staff do not use questioning skilfully enough to stimulate discussion or check learners' understanding thoroughly. As a result, too many learners do not develop a thorough enough understanding of their studies.

Broadly, teachers of adult and apprenticeship programmes make more effective use of teaching strategies. For example, teachers in ESOL and public services use explanations and scenario-based examples expertly to teach concepts well. Teachers of carpentry provide helpful illustrations and demonstrations that apprentices find useful when learning how to put the theory into practice. Consequently, adult learners and apprentices develop a good understanding of these subjects.

In education programmes for young learners, most teachers plan and use assessments effectively to test learners' knowledge. However, teachers' feedback on learners' work is not consistently good across subjects. At times, in subjects such as GCSE English and mathematics, teachers do not give learners developmental feedback on their work. Consequently, learners are unclear on what to do to improve their work and grade.

Leaders and managers do not check thoroughly the quality of education that learners and apprentices receive. They do not monitor learners' progress sufficiently closely across all provision types. In some curriculum areas, such as motor vehicle and GCSE English, managers and staff do not use tracking and recording systems to record learners' progress well enough. Consequently, in many cases, learners do not receive timely support to improve their progress, and many fall behind.

Staff provide most learners with access to a broad curriculum that goes beyond their qualifications. For example, in computing and construction qualifications, managers include professional certificates and qualifications to enhance learners' employability. In other subjects, teachers include trips to enrich learners' understanding of their subjects. For example, in A-level Sociology, learners go on trips to the Middle Temple and Houses of Parliament to stimulate their interest in law. However, apprentices do not have access to a broad curriculum beyond their programme's technical and vocational elements. Consequently, they have limited opportunities to develop and discover their interests and talents.

Most young learners and adults have a good understanding of fundamental British values. In lessons and tutorials, learners explore topics such as mutual respect and the rule of law. For example, in health and social care, learners discuss the different values associated with cultures and religions in relation to care and in photography, learners study copyright law within the context of professional photography. Consequently, most learners have a secure understanding of how British values apply to their lives.

In lessons and through different activities, staff teach learners about responsible and respectful citizenship. For example, in graphic design, learners analyse controversial advertisements to understand how racism can be implied or inferred. Similarly, in fashion, learners complete a project about consideration for the climate. Learners with high needs participate in charity events regularly and are proud to support local causes.

Most learners have access to a broad range of enrichment activities at the college. Leaders have provided sports clubs, subsidised gym memberships and art and music clubs which enable learners to develop their skills and interests. However, many learners and apprentices do not know what activities are available. Consequently, learners' participation in these activities is not high enough.

Too few young learners have meaningful work experience placements. For example, learners in courses such as art and design, computing and media do not have access to good-quality, industry-based work experience. However, in motor vehicle and plumbing programmes, young learners extend their skills through appropriate work experience with relevant employers. Although leaders have plans for learners to access work experience placements later in the academic year, some of these placements are not yet confirmed. In addition, learners are not aware of these plans and, as such, feel anxious about how they will access work experience.

Most learners understand how to live healthy lives. In education programmes for young people, staff promote learners' mental and physical well-being. Staff teach learners about the importance of healthy relationships and provide suitable opportunities to discuss consent through well-led tutorial sessions.

Leaders have created an inclusive environment in which learners from diverse backgrounds feel welcome and supported. Staff promote equality of opportunity very well. In the curriculum, for example, adult hairdressing learners work in an

inclusive and mutually respectful salon space where learners show interest in the diversity of ideas and cultures in each other's hair designs.

Governors correctly identify the strengths and main areas for improvement for the college. They have relevant backgrounds and expertise in education, finance and safeguarding. They use their knowledge and expertise effectively to challenge and support leaders to improve their performance and ask questions about declining achievement and low attendance. As a result, leaders have taken positive actions towards making improvements where they are needed. However, it is too early to see the impact of these actions on the overall quality of education.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders have implemented robust safeguarding policies and procedures to ensure the safety of their learners. They have created a strong safeguarding culture across UCG through rigorous training for staff and learners.

Leaders ensure that designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) are suitably trained. They have a detailed understanding of the local risks in the areas in which their learners and apprentices live and work. DSLs work well with learners' parents, employers and external agencies such as the local police, mental health charities and therapists to ensure the safety of their learners. This helps learners remain engaged with their studies.

Learners feel safe and know who to report concerns to. They value greatly the presence of security guards and the secure access arrangements at all campuses. Learners receive suitable information and training on a range of safeguarding topics such as sexual harassment and the local risks related to terrorism and extremism. Consequently, most learners have a sufficient understanding of these risks and know how to keep themselves and others safe.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders and governors should ensure that learners across all programmes and provision types receive consistently high-quality teaching.
- Leaders must ensure that learners with high needs and those on supported internship programmes have access to suitable teaching and appropriate assistive technologies and therapies to meet their individual needs.
- Leaders should ensure they have robust processes in place to track and respond to learners' progress so that they can achieve on time.
- Leaders should ensure that staff set and maintain clear and high expectations of learners' attendance and punctuality.
- Leaders should ensure that apprentices have access to a curriculum beyond their qualifications so they can develop their interests and talents more broadly.

Provider details

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Website	www.cwc.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Stephen Davis
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	10 to 13 December 2019
Main subcontractors	Community Systems Limited Back2Work Group Challenge-trg Skills Qualified Education The Skills Network Limited Arsenal Football Club plc University of Westminster

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy principal, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

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