

Ofsted's accreditation visit to Academy21

On 21 and 22 February 2024, Ofsted visited Academy21 as part of the [Online Education Accreditation Scheme](#). Through this scheme, providers of full-time online education to school-age children in England can apply to the Department for Education (DfE) for accreditation.

Ofsted visits providers to find out whether they meet the minimum standards for online education set by the DfE. This report sets out what we found during our visit on 21 and 22 February 2024. You can find out whether this provider is accredited by the DfE at [Get Information about Schools](#).

Key findings

- **Academy21 meets all the minimum standards** for online education.
- Led by the chief executive officer and executive headteacher, leaders have established a culture of high ambition and high expectations. There is a driven focus on providing the best online provision possible for the pupils they serve. This extends to all aspects of Academy21's work, including the quality of teaching and safeguarding.
- A significant strength of Academy21 is the strategic direction, focus and oversight of the executive teams at Inspired Education. There are very high levels of accountability, alongside similar levels of support. Central teams, including, for example, experts in safeguarding, finance, technological development and curriculum, provide additional expertise to support ongoing improvements.
- Teachers demonstrate strong subject knowledge alongside a secure understanding of the technical knowledge and skills needed to operate in an online environment. The positive learning environment they create promotes pupils' confidence, and this has an important impact on the progress they go on to make.
- Commissioning schools and local authorities value the quality and regularity of the information they receive about the pupils they place at Academy21. They praise the responsiveness of the service they receive. In conversation, one official told inspectors, 'I am confident that they wouldn't take on a new pupil if they couldn't meet that pupil's needs. They are not in the business of setting up a young person to fail.'
- Working with external partners, leaders have identified appropriate next steps for improvement. Inspectors agreed with these, including to:

- consider strategies by which Academy21 can provide opportunities for those pupils, who have the confidence to do so, to have some social engagement with each other within the safety of their online environment, and;
 - consider how to enhance the involvement that some parents could have in understanding the progress their children are making in their subjects, so they can feel more involved in this and use this information to support their child at home.
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Who is this online provider?

- Academy21 is an online alternative provision provider. It provides education for pupils aged 11 to 16 who are based in schools across England. Pupils attending often have special educational needs. They are either based at their homes or are supported to access the provision from their schools.
- Pupils attend Academy21 for varied periods of time. For some pupils, this is for a short period, for example due to an exclusion; for others, it is longer. This is often because pupils' mental health needs mean they are unable to attend a physical school. Academy21's core aim is to act as an educational bridge, supporting pupils to transition back into mainstream schooling or college.
- Academy21 works closely with placing schools. Each pupil has a school-based mentor and child protection representative. Academy21 provides them with daily information about each pupils attendance, engagement and progress in lessons. This information is supplemented by half-termly reports on the progress pupils are making. Schools value the quality and frequency of the information they receive.
- Academy21 offers a curriculum that is in line with the national curriculum at key stage 3; this includes access to the core subjects of English, mathematics and science, as well as humanities, computing and personal, social and health education (PSHE). Older pupils study GCSEs in these subjects or can access functional skills qualifications if they are not yet ready for academic study. Pupils have some access to physical education, for example through online yoga sessions. The provider also offers well-being and counselling support.
- Academy21 is part of the wider Inspired Education Group, which owns independent schools across the U.K. and internationally and runs another online provider, King's Interhigh. This accreditation visit only considered the provision offered to pupils at Academy21.
- Currently, 106 school-age pupils study with Academy21 full time. Most of these pupils have an [education, health and care \(EHC\) plan](#). All pupils live in England. Another 2000 school-age pupils study with Academy21 part time.

How are pupils taught at Academy21?

- Pupils are taught through live, interactive lessons led by highly skilled, qualified teachers. Pupils study in class groups of no more than 15, complemented by one-to-one support delivered by their teacher in break-out rooms. These live lessons are recorded so that pupils can catch up if they miss sessions due to absence.
- Teachers establish a positive learning environment, welcoming pupils into class by name and encouraging them throughout lessons. This has a demonstrable impact on improving pupils' confidence and readiness to learn. Pupils' attendance improves, and evidence shows that the approaches taken enable pupils to make progress and, in many cases, successfully reintegrate back into their school or other educational placements.
- Leaders at Academy21 have drawn on the expertise of the wider Inspired Group to provide teachers with a range of innovative and specialised resources that support effective online teaching. This includes the use of an artificial intelligence tool that provides feedback to pupils and supports teachers' assessment of the progress they are making.
- Pupils typically have four lessons each week in each of their chosen subjects. These are scheduled flexibly to meet individual pupils' needs. On a Friday, pupils can access 'consolidation' sessions, therapeutic interventions and PSHE. Creative education is deliberately interwoven through other subjects, such as creative writing in English. Academy21 also provides careers support to pupils, which includes the development of practical work experiences.

What are Academy21's arrangements like for keeping children safe?

- **Ofsted's visits to online providers can give only a limited level of assurance on the effectiveness of safeguarding, compared to our inspections of schools and other providers of face-to-face education and training.** However, we found that the arrangements for keeping children safe at Academy21 are appropriate.
- Leaders have established a secure learning platform that pupils can access from home or from school. Unique user identifications are provided to each pupil, and as they start at the provider, they are taught how to use the platform features safely. Pupils are closely supervised by staff at all times. Staff are kept fully informed of the vulnerabilities and needs of the pupils they teach in each class. This means they are highly attuned to pupils' needs, and the provider's records show they routinely flag any concerns to leaders.
- The provider works very effectively with placing schools and local authorities. Commissioners highlighted the strengths of partnership working in terms of responding quickly to the needs of pupils.

- Working safely online, and ensuring pupils know how to keep themselves safe online, is a high priority. The vast majority of staff who responded to the questionnaire replied with confidence about safeguarding training, their own awareness of systems and how to raise urgent concerns. These were also reflected in the meetings we held with teachers and other support staff.
- The systems in place for recruiting new staff, whether they be pupil-facing or based in central support teams, follow the statutory guidance that applies to registered schools. Final decisions about the suitability of new members of staff are taken by the executive headteacher. Leaders will only appoint teachers who are 'right' for the pupils they will work with. The success of this approach is reflected in the feedback we obtained from both parents and school mentors, who all highlighted the personal qualities that teachers bring to their lessons, which encourage pupils to engage (and often re-engage) in learning.

What do pupils and parents and carers think about Academy21?

- Pupils reported to us through our questionnaire that teachers keep them well informed about how they are doing in their work, although sometimes they would like more advice and guidance about the next steps they are given. They very rarely experience any bullying here. Many said they wished their lessons were longer and that they could do more subjects. They really value their class teachers. Some of the feedback they gave us included: 'It is an amazing school, and the teachers are very supportive and welcoming'.
- Parents were similarly positive, singling out the engaging and supportive teachers. Comments included, 'My child has been off school for over a year due to extreme anxiety and not being able to attend school. Academy21 has given my child another chance at education where she is thriving and enjoying school again. I cannot thank them enough.'
- A few parents said they would like to have some direct feedback about the progress their child is making. Similarly, some pupils told us they would like to have opportunities to 'meet' each other online in a social but supervised way so that they could make friends with each other.

About the visit

- This is Academy21's first accreditation visit. Mrs Philippa Darley, His Majesty's Inspector was the lead inspector, accompanied by Specialist Inspectors, Ms Kathryn Bell, Mr John Nixon and Mr John Lamborn.

Compliance with the Department for Education's standards for online education

This section reports on how well Academy21 meets the standards for online education.

Academy21 meets all of the applicable standards for online education set out by the DfE ('the standards'). The standards that are not applicable to Academy21 are listed below.

The full list of standards can be found in [DfE's guidance on meeting the online education standards](#).

Standards that do not apply to this provider

The following standards do not apply to this provider:

- **Standard 1.8** only applies where the provider has at least one full-time pupil of above compulsory school age
- **Standards 5.11, 5.12, 5.13, 5.14, 5.16, 5.17, 5.18** only apply where the provider uses supply staff
- **Standard 5.22** only applies if a proprietor lives or has lived outside of the UK
- **Standards 6.5, 6.10** only apply where a report on the provider has been published under the Online Education Accreditation Scheme at the time of the visit

Contact details for Academy21

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