

The SMB group

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

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| Unique reference number: | 130754 |
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| Type of provider: | General further education college |
| Address: | Stephenson Campus Thornborough Road Coalville LE67 3TN |

Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

The SMB Group was inspected in February 2023. 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 resolving the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

The SMB Group was formed in 2020 from the merger of Stephenson and Brooksby Melton colleges. At the time of the monitoring visit, around 1,700 learners aged 16 to 18, 300 adult learners and 1,080 apprentices were studying at the college. There were 67 learners in receipt of high-needs funding. Since the previous inspection, adult learning provision at the college has reduced significantly. A majority of adult learners are employed and study short courses via distance learning. A small minority of adult learners study level 2 and 3 hairdressing courses part time.

Themes

What progress have leaders and managers made to ensure young learners benefit from, high-quality, ambitious, and well taught curriculums, that provide them with substantial opportunities to practise and recap what they learn?

Significant progress

Since the previous inspection, leaders have strengthened their quality assurance and improvement arrangements significantly. Newly appointed curriculum quality managers work successfully with leaders to drive improvements in teaching, learning, and assessment. Leaders have quickly introduced a highly effective 'teacher toolkit' to improve the quality of curriculum planning and teaching. Teachers consistently use a range of strategies, such as directed questioning, and recall activities effectively.

Leaders and managers carefully plan the pathways and topics that young learners study. They plan ambitious curriculums, that extend beyond the minimum requirements of the course. For example, in equine, level 3 learners study social licencing and scientific principles of learning theory, and level 2 learners progress from basic pole work to jumping skills. Learners benefit from extensive opportunities to develop their skills and aspirations beyond the courses they study and make swift progress as a result.

Leaders and managers plan high-quality courses that include industry knowledge, skills and behaviours (IKSBs). Teachers carefully map these IKSBs and successfully include them in lessons, to ensure learners develop work ready skills. For example, in animal care, level 2 learners study how to safely approach and handle a range of animals, and level 3 equine learners complete yard manager duties. As a result, learners develop the knowledge and skills required to be successful in their chosen industries.

Teachers link practical and theory lessons skilfully. Learners benefit from substantial opportunities to practise and develop fluency in their technical skills. For example, in level 3 animal care, learners apply their enterprise management skills to real life scenarios. Learners are proficient in their skills and develop high levels of independence and autonomy as a result.

Leaders, managers, and teachers have high expectations and aspirations for young learners. Teachers set challenging subject and personal targets for learners, that are frequently reviewed. Learners complete practical and written work to a consistently high standard. They develop their personal skills, such as teamwork, communication, timekeeping and organisation, swiftly.

Leaders and managers have successfully introduced directed improvement and reflection time (DIRT) sessions into all curriculum areas. For example, learners studying level 3 sport, use DIRT sessions to recall what they have learned so far and plan what they need to do to improve their skills further. As a result, learners benefit from well-planned opportunities to recap what they learned, and have a good understanding of how to improve their knowledge and skills.

What progress have leaders and managers made to ensure apprentices are prepared for their final assessments, and achieve well?

Significant progress

Leaders and managers have taken decisive action to improve the quality of their apprenticeship provision. They hold useful monthly meetings to identify the few apprentices who are falling behind, and intervene swiftly to help them stay on target. As a result of these actions, the number of apprentices who have exceeded their planned end date has declined substantially.

Leaders quickly revised their initial advice and guidance, and induction process to ensure apprentices are suitable for their chosen course. Specialist apprenticeship assessors take direct responsibility for recruiting apprentices. They provide detailed guidance to employers and prospective apprentices about how the course is structured, delivered, and assessed. Apprentices and employers understand, in detail, the requirements of an apprenticeship. As a result, the number of apprentices who leave their course early has reduced significantly since the previous inspection.

Leaders and managers ensure that tutors plan on- and off-the-job training well. Apprentices confidently articulate how they apply their learning to the workplace and value the quality of off-the-job training that they receive. Apprentices feel confident and well prepared for their final assessments and know how to achieve high grades.

Achievement rates for apprenticeship courses have notably increased. The proportion of apprentices who achieve distinction grades, particularly in construction, heavy goods vehicle, and forklift truck courses, has improved significantly since the previous inspection.

What progress have leaders and managers made to ensure adult learners benefit from a broad curriculum, that develops the knowledge and skills they need for employment or to make progress in their chosen careers?

Significant progress

Since the previous inspection, leaders quickly revised their personal development curriculum and introduced several initiatives, which are having a beneficial impact on their adult learners. Leaders and managers understand the needs of their adult population well, and provide activities that are most appropriate for them. For example, as a majority of adult learners are already in employment, leaders have focused on activities to support learners progress within their careers.

Leaders helpfully capture career aspirations and goals of adult learners during initial assessment. They use this information well to provide additional learning opportunities that support current and future career aims. As a result, adult learners benefit from targeted careers support and guidance from the start of their course.

Leaders and managers have taken swift and effective action to improve adult learners' access to careers advice and guidance. For example, learners have access to subject specialists to discuss career aims, plan next steps, and follow up with exit interviews for further advice and guidance. As a result, adult learners on distance and vocational courses are aware of future career opportunities, and how to achieve these.

Leaders, managers and teachers work closely with stakeholders to ensure adult learners develop the skills and knowledge needed to progress successfully in their careers. For example, within level 2 hairdressing, teachers include lessons on being self-employed, marketing and developing a brand, and insurance requirements. As a result, learners have a good understanding of how to set up their own business.

Leaders rightly prioritise the needs of the small number of adult learners who are not employed. They support these learners effectively to become career ready and access the employment market. Learners benefit from bespoke activities to develop fundamental employability skills, such as conducting job searches, interview preparations, completing application forms and CV writing. This population of learners become more confident in accessing employment opportunities and applying for jobs as a result of the support they receive.

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