

Northern College for Residential Adult Education Limited

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	130525
Name of lead inspector:	Charles Searle, Her Majesty's Inspector
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Type of provider:	Specialist designated institution
Address:	Wentworth Castle Stainborough Barnsley S75 3ET

Interim visit

Context and focus of visit

On 17 March 2020, all routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out 'interim visits' to further education and skills providers. Interim visits are to help learners, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of learners in this period, including those with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below and the findings are based on discussions with leaders, managers, staff and learners.

Information about the provider

Northern College for Residential Adult Education is a specialist designated institution. The college delivers most of its provision from its base at Wentworth Castle near Barnsley. It works with partners in the trade union movement, local authorities, universities and the voluntary and community sector. At the time of the visit, there were 172 adult students. The largest programmes were access to higher education, with 53 students, and teacher education, with 54 students. The remaining students were on GCSE courses in English and mathematics, courses in trade union studies, pre-access courses, and short residential courses. Most students are drawn from the Yorkshire area.

What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of learners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?

One of the main priorities for senior leaders during the initial COVID-19 restrictions was to ensure that the residential students could return to their homes safely when the college had to close. They also had to ensure that students on long programmes, such as access to higher education and teacher education, could carry on learning remotely and complete their qualifications successfully.

Senior leaders organised the return of students to the college in September in a staged way, based on some of the lessons learned at the start of the pandemic. They first brought back residential students on long level 3 programmes, so they could build relationships with staff that would benefit them if there was to be another period of prolonged restrictions. They then brought back students on level 2 programmes and provided an extended induction period to make sure that these students felt confident using online learning platforms. Students on other courses are taught online or through a mix of online and face-to-face delivery.

Managers have developed some new programmes to address needs emerging during the pandemic. Tutors have designed intensive English and mathematics courses to give students the qualifications they need to secure work more quickly.

Leaders carefully monitor students' attendance in online learning. If a student is unable to attend, they ensure that staff maintain close contact so that the student remains engaged and catches up through self-study and individual support. They oversee the quality of teaching using online lesson observations and remote work scrutiny.

Senior leaders report that the number of students in the current academic year has declined by a half. This decline is concentrated among those who would normally attend short residential courses. Some adults do not yet feel secure enough to leave their home communities to attend courses. Some small voluntary organisations no longer have the staffing to signpost potential students to the college in the numbers they would have done previously.

What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of learners?

Leaders explained how they were able to expand quickly the use of their established virtual learning platform to support the move to online learning during the initial period of restrictions. Staff use this to provide short courses, resources for longer courses, assessment and discussion forums.

Managers ensured that students had access to computer equipment and the internet at home. They provided laptops and dongles for students and staff so that they could take part in online learning. Students and staff have access to computer technicians to support them with using technology.

Leaders encourage peer support and sharing of good practice to help develop the skills of staff in online teaching. They also provided training early in the period of restrictions in teaching online.

Students valued the way that staff enabled them to continue to develop their skills and knowledge and complete their courses remotely. They have found the online and telephone support from their tutors particularly helpful in reinforcing their learning, building their resilience and ensuring their well-being.

Teachers have adapted their delivery of the curriculum to enable students to participate fully. In mathematics, for example, teachers changed the sequence of topics during the initial period of restrictions as some lend themselves more readily to online teaching than others. Teachers have developed their skills in managing features of online delivery, including breakout rooms and question and chat functions, which they see as critical to successful online learning.

Leaders have ensured that staff continue to provide careers guidance, much of which is online and via telephone, and includes remote open days. They also established a 'passport to success' programme that helps students to identify what they need to do to achieve their career aspirations.

How are leaders ensuring that learners are safe and well informed about potential risks, including from online sources?

Leaders and managers ensured that staff and students were aware of how to stay safe online when the COVID-19 restrictions began and all teaching became remote. They ensured that tutors were trained on how to use online waiting rooms to enable them to check the identity of students before they entered classes. Tutors briefed students on how to avoid sharing confidential information on screens inadvertently.

Since returning to the college in September, tutors have developed a short course on how to stay safe online and a course on making workplaces COVID-secure.

Tutors identified that the restrictions increased students' levels of anxiety and mental health concerns. Students on residential courses had to juggle the completion of their own studies with home-educating their children. Staff ensured that these students could continue to access childcare vouchers.

Students report that they feel very safe at the college. Leaders and managers have focused on minimising the risks of COVID-19 infection, which students appreciate.

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