

South Essex College of Further and Higher Education

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	130672
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Type of provider:	General further education college
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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.

We intend to return to routine inspection in January 2021 but will keep the exact timing under review.

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.

Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we made this visit remotely to reduce pressure on the provider.

Information about the provider

South Essex College of Further and Higher Education merged with Prospects College of Advanced Technology (PROCAT) in February 2019. It now has four main sites. The largest is based in Southend-on-Sea. The other sites are in Basildon and Thurrock. The college provides a broad range of vocational and academic courses for 16- to 18-year-olds, and courses for adults, as well as a small A-level provision in Southend. The former PROCAT site in Basildon specialises in engineering and building services programmes.

The college has 4,900 learners aged 16 to 18 on roll, of which 88 have high needs and 250 have education, health and care plans. There are 1,500 adult learners and 1,000 apprentices. The college works with two subcontractors to provide courses for adult learners.

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?

Leaders work with employers and stakeholders to identify how the skills required in the future may be changing. For example, they will introduce robotics and automation within engineering T-Level programmes in September 2021.

Leaders ensure that staff receive ongoing professional development to improve their skills in providing remote teaching. Leaders have invested in new platforms for online learning. Managers consider that planning and assessment practices have improved.

Leaders risk assess learners to identify what appropriate intervention actions to take. They hold frequent risk management meetings. Leaders and managers implement plans that ensure COVID-secure practices on campus.

Leaders identified challenges in remote learning for learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and for the small proportion of learners with limited access to technology. They have invested in laptops to loan out to those in need, and they have increased the number of learning support staff.

Learners on programmes below level 2 now access a full timetable of learning at college. Most learners and apprentices have blended learning programmes. Almost all adult learning programmes are taught online.

Leaders have identified the negative impact of the pandemic on learners studying trade qualifications. Staff focus on helping learners and apprentices catch up with the practical skills they could not acquire during the first period of national restrictions. Leaders say many apprentices face a delay in being able to take their final assessment. This is because final examinations and assessments for licences to practice are in high demand nationally. Many apprentices have to wait longer than planned before they can complete their programmes. This has led to a delay in new learners starting in some subject areas.

Leaders provide additional workshops for learners who completed their programmes during the summer. This enables them to hone their practical skills prior to entering employment or the next level of study. Managers identify an increase in demand for digital skills training, retraining, and English and mathematics for adults.

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?

Managers state that attendance for online learning is high. However, they recognise that learners have welcomed returning to face-to-face teaching. Leaders and managers use a range of tools and reports to monitor and analyse learners' skills development. Tutors report that learner behaviour has improved. Learners appreciate coming into college and are highly compliant with the safety measures in place.

Managers identify that sourcing suitable work experience placements for young people continues to be a major challenge due to the pandemic. Tutors work with employers to provide opportunities for learners to develop relevant skills. Managers state that careers advice and guidance have continued during the pandemic.

Tutors say that their work with learning support staff has improved. They work more closely together to review education, health and care plans. Support staff join remote

online lessons to work with those learners identified as needing extra help with their learning.

Managers carry out lesson visits and observations to identify and share existing good teaching and learning practice across the college, including observing remote teaching. Leaders have an ongoing programme of professional development to target tutors' individual development and training needs.

Tutors have redesigned the learners' induction programme in consideration of the pandemic. They identify learners' knowledge and skills gaps early in the programme and assess learners' ability to access learning remotely. Tutors identified that a large proportion of young learners new to the college lacked organisation, study and revision skills. Staff planned sessions to prepare these learners for their English and mathematics examinations in November.

Staff order the curriculum to focus on mandatory core units at the start of the programme. Learners on a blended programme complete theoretical aspects online and practical skills workshops on site. Staff have considered how learners can continue with their learning if having to self-isolate. They incorporate recording, live streaming and tools for learners to be involved remotely in lessons.

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

Leaders and managers responsible for safeguarding recognise a rise in issues related to mental health. They have expanded services to help learners with these concerns.

Leaders describe the importance of e-safety, both with regards to safe practices and online etiquette, for students and staff. Staff and students talk confidently about how to stay safe online. They identify that this is taught in a variety of ways, with an array of resources available for additional information.

Managers continue to work closely with local authorities and multi-agency teams to review plans for the most vulnerable, including children looked after. Through their work with local authorities and the police, staff have endeavoured to keep up to date with issues affecting their local communities.

Staff feel frequent communication from leaders has been of benefit. They feel well-informed about how to identify vulnerable learners and deal with situations that may arise. They identify that rapport with parents has improved.

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