

Queen Alexandra College

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

Unique reference number:	131963
Name of lead inspector:	Martin Ward, His Majesty's Inspector
Inspection dates:	13 and 14 June 2023
Type of provider:	Independent specialist college
Address:	49 Court Oak Road Harborne Birmingham B17 9TG

Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Queen Alexandra College was inspected in March 2022. 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 college offers residential and day provision for students with a visual impairment, autistic spectrum condition, physical disabilities and/or other learning difficulties. The college offers a wide range of personal development and vocational courses from pre-entry level to level 3. At the time of the visit, there were 348 students studying on day programmes and 28 students living in college residential provision. Seventy-six students studied on the LEAP (learning employability and progression) programme, which is for entry-level learners. These learners were the focus of our visit.

Themes

What progress have senior leaders made in reviewing the entry level curriculum to ensure that it is aspirational for entry level students and that they have gained the skills they need to leave college when they are ready?

Reasonable progress

Senior leaders had swiftly reviewed the content of the entry level curriculum, as part of a wider review of the whole curriculum. Within the entry level curriculum, they had planned eight different courses based on local job market information and the aspirations of their entry level learners. Leaders had designed courses to prepare learners for employment in animal care, business, care, design and production, hospitality, multi-trades, retail and sport and leisure.

By removing more generic courses, and introducing courses with a clear vocational content, leaders provide greater clarity for parents, students and teachers. From the beginning of the course, students develop the skills that they need to progress to their next steps.

Senior leaders have recently introduced the animal care course in response to local employer requests and the interests of entry level learners. Early signs are that students benefit from high-quality placements in the community, in places such as the urban farm and dog-grooming salons.

Senior leaders have chosen appropriate entry criteria for the courses, and shared this with all staff, parents and students. Students are clear about the reasons they are on the course and the progress they are making.

Senior leaders have rightly included work experience or placements, and the development of English and mathematics within each course. Through staff development and quality assurance arrangements, senior leaders ensure that the curriculum includes the knowledge, skills and behaviours that students need to work in their chosen sector.

Senior leaders have correctly identified that, although there have been improvements in the content and the teaching of the curriculum, they need to further improve the quality of education in English, and the quality and length of some of the work experience placements. For English, senior leaders have put in place detailed improvement plans, which include individual staff development plans, internal and external support, and helpful adaptations to group sizes. Senior leaders acknowledge the need to improve the use of initial assessment, clarity of exposition and feedback so that students make better progress in English.

What progress have governors made in challenging senior leaders to remedy the weaknesses in the entry curriculum pathway and in English?

Reasonable progress

Governors responded rapidly and positively to the recommendations from the previous inspection. They have implemented a range of actions to improve the level of support and challenge that they can provide for senior leaders.

Collaborating closely with senior leaders, governors have implemented a governor link scheme. This comprises of a series of structured visits by governors to the college. Governors meet with staff and students and discuss the impact of decisions made by leaders at the college. They ask challenging questions of senior leaders at board meetings to improve the learning experiences of students at the college.

Governors have collaborated with senior leaders to change the format of reports so that it is easier for them to understand the purpose of the report and how it links to improvement plans. In meetings, governors spend more time contributing to discussions about the quality of education that students receive.

Governors have successfully encouraged senior leaders to seek external support and fresh ideas to include in their improvement plans. Governors monitor the post-inspection action plan effectively through regular meetings, and to ensure that managers complete planned actions in the allotted timescales to guarantee that leaders make swift improvements.

Governors have a clear and accurate understanding of the progress that senior leaders have made since the previous inspection. They are aware of the improvements in curriculum design, management structure and quality assurance processes. They are also acutely aware of the areas for further improvement.

What progress have leaders and managers made in providing the support that students need to understand and participate in healthy relationships?

Significant progress

Senior leaders have worked purposefully since the previous inspection to develop a precise personal development curriculum for all students. Previously, teachers reacted to the needs of an individual student. This led to significant inconsistencies in what teachers taught and what students understood.

Following extensive research, including consulting with external specialists and working closely with senior managers at other colleges, senior leaders have planned an appropriate curriculum which includes teaching about healthy relationships, staying safe, appropriate physical contact, and consent.

Senior leaders and managers have considered well how to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of groups of students and the starting points of individual students. They have carefully considered who will teach the curriculum and provided relevant training for these staff.

Senior leaders have recruited and invested in knowledgeable staff, an effective management structure and the development of commercial and in-house learning resources. They have developed an online bank of resources which staff can use when teaching the courses, but also includes clear guidance on how to use the resources.

During our visit, the students with whom we spoke could explain articulately about the nature of friendships, the concept of trust, and how to behave safely with strangers. They were able to describe distinct types of relationships and what constituted appropriate behaviour in each of them. Students were able to discuss the concept of consent given their level of cognitive ability and emotional maturity.

Students talked in detail about a diverse range of drugs. They could distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate use of drugs and how they were aware of the dangers associated with being approached by strangers. Students, for whom it was appropriate, were aware of the threats of gangs and the work of county lines.

What progress have senior leaders made in improving the quality of teaching in entry level pathways and English?

Reasonable progress

Senior leaders have provided specific training to improve the planning of the curriculum. Teachers in the entry vocational courses have used this effectively to make sure that they teach the topics clearly and in an order that helps students to build knowledge and skills over time.

Teachers who teach entry vocational courses are clear about students' starting points in their subject using baseline assessments. They use this information, in combination with the education, health and care plans (EHCPs), to set targets and design curriculum activities to ensure that students develop the skills they need to achieve their long-term goals.

Teachers in the entry vocational areas are well qualified and understand their sector well. They ensure that students understand and implement safe working practices in practical activities.

Students develop good practical skills in realistic work settings. For example, in the construction trades course, teachers teach students the skills they need to complete the complex task of making wooden bird boxes for the local authority. In the sport and leisure course, students know about cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, body composition and flexibility, so that they can design an appropriate fitness programme for clients.

Senior leaders work closely and positively with the English team to improve the quality of teaching and the progress that students make. A few students are not making the progress of which they are capable because teachers provide them with work which is too easy.

Communication between the entry vocational and English teaching teams is not strong. As a result, teachers do not reinforce students' English skills within the vocational context. Similarly, teachers do not explicitly support the English skills that students need in the vocational context.

Across all courses, teachers do not consistently provide developmental feedback that helps students to improve their performance, and do not make sure that students do not repeat the same mistakes.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that all students receive impartial careers education, information, advice and guidance, and the training and support they need in preparation for adulthood?

Reasonable progress

Following the curriculum review, senior leaders have developed a new approach for initial advice and guidance for enrolment on to courses. Staff use the revised enrolment criteria accurately to match students' starting points and career aspirations to the planned course. Staff involve parents, carers and students appropriately in the initial discussions. Students on entry vocational courses are on the right course to meet their needs, as outlined in the EHCPs and aspirations.

Staff made accurate assessments of learners' levels of English for recent enrolments. However, a few students who had been at the college for a longer time were not on the right level, given their previous achievements in English.

Senior leaders had developed a new careers strategy. All students now complete a careers plan on entry to the college. With appropriate staff support, students write targets which, on completion, will help them to progress to their career aspirations. All students have access to impartial specialist careers advice, and meetings with their personal tutors. Some students have visited workplaces, in line with their career aspirations.

While students receive an impartial careers review, they had not consistently received internal reviews of their targets with their personal tutors. These students did not have a clear understanding of the progress they were making towards their career aspirations.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that students benefit from well-planned and relevant work experience linked to their long-term goals?

Reasonable progress

Senior leaders had improved students' access to work experience and work placements. Senior leaders plan for work experience and work placements within all courses and for all students. All students complete work-related activity.

Leaders have identified several types of work experience to suit the diverse needs and starting points of students. Staff plan opportunities for internal and external work experience, and for group and individual experiences. Staff make appropriate choices for most students. Students progress from internal group experiences to external experiences, which require students to adapt to an unfamiliar work environment.

Staff organise high-quality external placements. For example, at the Sense Café, hospitality students complete a full application and interview process prior to the placement. The manager introduces each student to the distinct roles within the placement, and the manager trains them to complete each role. Support assistants from the college provide good support for the students on placement. Students regularly complete their work diary. Students develop the skills they need to work in their sector of choice. Students complete work experience over an extended period of weeks, and for between four and five hours per day.

However, staff provide some internal and external placements which are for short periods of time, and do not provide students with a realistic experience of the demands of a job. For a few students, this is not ambitious enough and does not provide students with the opportunity to practise their skills or adapt to the challenges of regular work.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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