

The Deaf Academy (Formerly Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education)

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	132001
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Visit date(s):	4 to 5 November 2020
Type of provider:	Independent specialist 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 and apprentices in this period, including learners 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.

Information about the provider

The Deaf Academy (formerly Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education) includes a school for pupils aged five to 16 and a college for students aged 16 and over. The college is based in a purpose-built site in Exmouth. The vast majority of the students are profoundly deaf and use British sign language as their first language. Many students have additional, often complex, needs which are barriers to learning. Students study individual programmes at the college site or at one of the partner colleges. All have an education, health and care plans (EHCP). The college offers day and residential placements. Students from many parts of England and Wales attend the college and stay in its residential accommodation. At the time of this visit, 31 students aged between 16 and 25 years attended the college.

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?

Senior leaders told us that throughout the pandemic their priority has been to ensure that all students receive their full entitlement to education. Students continue to attend lessons face-to-face wherever possible, but, where it is not possible, they have been taught through the college's online academy. This was newly built in March. The aim of the online academy was to give students the same learning schedule and teacher contact they would normally have at college. Staff ensured that all students had the technology they would need at home and could access the online academy successfully.

Parents told us that they were very pleased with the amount of online learning their children have undertaken, and with the communication and support they receive from staff at the college.

Early in the pandemic, the most vulnerable students and the children of key workers attended a 'Spring Camp', which provided face-to-face teaching and support.

Leaders explained that the supported internship programme has been severely affected by COVID-19 restrictions, with 7 out of 9 work placements being closed. They established a new employment and enterprise programme for these students. This programme includes short accredited qualifications in first aid and money management. These students also receive careers advice, and support in curriculum vitae building and completing application forms for work. Leaders hope students can return to work-related activity and placements in January 2021.

Three weeks ago, a student tested positive for coronavirus. All staff and students immediately entered lockdown. However, leaders transferred the full timetable online within two days and students continued with their education. In this period, students with more complex needs, for whom online learning was inappropriate, were provided with home learning packs. These included tasks to support their functional and practical learning while at home.

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 describe how their students have a wide range of complex physical and emotional needs, over and above being deaf. They explain that their teaching and learning strategy is highly individualised, with the intention that each student will develop rich knowledge and skills. They summarise this approach as 'knowing and growing every learner'.

Leaders recognised that a greater focus is needed to develop each student's literacy and communication skills. They have revised the way they teach these skills, including adding more content in each lesson. In September, staff undertook new assessments of each student against national standards to identify their starting points and gaps in learning. Staff used this information to plan students' individual learning programme to meet their EHCP goals.

At the start of the pandemic, leaders prioritised the training of staff in the skills they needed to teach effectively online. However, teachers feel that online teaching caused disruption and delay to students' learning, not least because the pace of teaching can be slowed, or the meaning missed. For example, they explained that signing in an online environment is inherently two-dimensional, whereas signing works best in three dimensions. This means teachers have to work much harder and take longer to communicate with students when they are signing. The small number of students we spoke with said they found it hard to keep up and concentrate in online lessons and much prefer learning in face-to-face lessons.

Teachers report that their assessment and monitoring of students' learning and progress are the same irrespective of whether they are teaching online or face-to-

face. Leaders say that students' attendance and engagement in learning since the start of the pandemic and during the COVID-19 restrictions have been very high.

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

College leaders recognise the complexities and particular challenges that students experience, such as isolation and exclusion, and have created a nurturing and supportive culture. They have a dedicated social worker on the staff team, and they work in partnership with local authority support agencies. All college staff receive either an enhanced- or higher-level of safeguarding training, which is renewed every two years.

Teachers have received additional training and support to teach students safely online and say they are confident in doing so. During the first national lockdown, leaders created a digital safeguarding hub for staff working from home to record and share concerns about students. Teachers found this to be a crucial channel of communication.

Students are trained in how to stay safe online. They explained the importance of keeping personal information safe and setting privacy settings on social media. Students know who to talk to if they have a concern. They feel safe and well-supported working at home or college.

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