
Section 2

Sector summaries: Independent specialist colleges

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Context

This year, there are seven registered independent specialist colleges in Wales. This is the same as in January 2018. These colleges educate around 205 learners aged 16 and over. The colleges provide for a diverse range of pupils' needs, including autistic spectrum disorder, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties. In four of the colleges, many learners live in residential homes attached to the college.

In addition to full inspections, we carry out regular monitoring visits of independent specialist colleges. These visits consider the progress made by the colleges against specific recommendations from core inspections and previous monitoring visits. This year, we carried out monitoring visits to six specialist colleges and no full inspections.

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Standards

In the six colleges monitored this year, most learners make at least suitable progress against the goals in their individual learning plans. Over time, they improve their literacy and numeracy skills in relation to their starting points. Where relevant, nearly all learners attain relevant units of accreditation or nationally recognised qualifications at a level appropriate to their ability.

In four of the colleges, they apply and consolidate their literacy and numeracy skills very successfully through activities that build their confidence and promote their independence. For example, they improve their independent living skills and acquire valuable work-related and vocational skills through purposeful work-experience placements on-site or in the local community.

In these colleges, many learners make particularly strong progress in developing their social and communication skills because of the well-planned learning experiences and specialist support provided by the colleges. For example, in one college, many learners use signs and symbols highly effectively to assist their understanding and communication. These skills support learners well in making the transition to a more independent life after college.

In two colleges, learners do not make the progress they are capable of in developing their independence and practical skills because of shortcomings in tutors' planning and the range of learning experiences provided.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning

In all of the colleges visited this year, learners enjoy attending college and demonstrate positive attitudes to learning. In lessons, most learners participate enthusiastically and focus well on activities. They interact positively with each other and build positive relationships with staff, responding constructively to feedback and sustaining their engagement successfully. Many develop their resilience and problem-solving skills effectively through enterprise activities or programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

In four of the colleges, many learners make strong progress in addressing targets to do with their physical and emotional wellbeing. For example, in three colleges, learners make strong progress against physiotherapy and speech and language goals set by the college's multi-disciplinary team. Over time, learners with difficult behaviours learn to manage their emotions because of the consistent and sensitive support provided by teaching staff.

Teaching and learning experiences

In all of the colleges visited, teaching staff have a strong understanding of the needs of their learners and build productive working relationships with them. They use this knowledge appropriately to set individual learning goals that take suitable account of learners' different interests and aspirations.



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In four of the colleges visited this year, teaching focuses particularly effectively on developing learners' independence. In these colleges, learning experiences provide learners with a broad range of stimulating activities that engage their interests and support learners' progress to their likely destinations well. Tutors' planning builds suitably on learners' prior achievements. Tutors set targets for learners that clearly identify short steps of learning that are measurable and meaningful.

Where there are shortcomings, tutors' planning does not consistently promote independent learning and the range of learning experiences provided by the college is too narrow. In particular, the deployment of learning support staff inhibits the development of learners' independence. In one college, learner targets are too broad. As a result, learners and staff are not always clear about the next steps needed for progress.

Care, support and guidance

The quality of care, support and guidance is a particularly strong feature in four of the six colleges visited this year. In these colleges, robust processes to identify learners' starting points on entry to the college provide tutors and support staff with detailed information on the needs and abilities of learners. They monitor and review learners' progress regularly against a wide range of outcomes, including valuable targets to support their wellbeing and independence.

In three colleges, the education team works together very effectively with staff from the college's multi-disciplinary team. This approach ensures that there is a well co-ordinated approach to the support for learners' wider needs. Staff from both teams meet regularly to review learners' progress and plan suitable interventions to enable them to access education and to help teaching staff support learners successfully in sessions. In two colleges, staff use a wide range of communication strategies particularly effectively to enable learners of all abilities to participate fully in decision-making.

In two colleges, partnerships with learners' previous schools are under-developed. This means that the college does not have important information about learners' needs and prior learning before entry, and makes it difficult for these colleges in planning suitable learner pathways when they join the college.

Leadership and management

In four of the colleges visited this year, leaders and managers create a strong sense of vision and purpose that focuses clearly on ensuring that provision meets the needs of all learners. These colleges provide calm and inclusive learning environments that support learners effectively to make progress against their learning and personal goals.



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In these colleges, leaders have a strong understanding of the college's strengths and areas for development. They focus suitably on improvement and make good progress against the recommendations from previous monitoring visits. Staffing arrangements and programmes of professional learning support these priorities well. In two colleges, there are particularly effective arrangements to involve staff in self evaluation and improvement planning processes. This approach is very successful in building the capacity of staff to bring about important improvements to the provision in these colleges. However, overall, weaknesses in self-evaluation and improvement planning remain an important shortcoming in leadership in four of the colleges visited this year.

In one college, the progress made against recommendations from the previous monitoring visit has been too slow.