

# Assessment Report

Abingdon and Witney College

ASSESSMENT INFORMATION	
Assessment Type	Accreditation Review
Assessor's Decision	Standard Met
Assessor's Name	Stuart McRill
Evidence Gathering/Assessment Date/s	20/06/2023 – 23/06/2023
Client ID and Assessment Reference	C13457 - PN201930
Accreditation Review to be conducted by	21/05/2026

METHODOLOGY	
Evidence gathering	This remote assessment was Microsoft Teams centred with some telephone evidence gathering
Staff interviews	34
Recipient interviews	18
Partner interviews	3
Document review	A Microsoft Teams folder of evidence had been mapped to the criteria and included: Strategic Plan 2022 – 2027, self-assessment reports, job descriptions, performance data, case studies, examples of IAG marketing, action plans and evaluation reports

## About the organisation

Abingdon and Witney College (the organisation) is a medium sized further education college based on the four main sites of Abingdon Campus, Common Leys Farm, Witney Campus and Bicester Construction Skills Centre. The College provides vocational, professional, and technical training to young people and adults throughout Oxfordshire, with a curriculum offer that includes a 14-16 provision (developed in partnership with schools and the local authority), vocationally focused further education and higher education, adult and community learning and an expanding portfolio of apprenticeships.

Underpinning and central to the Abingdon and Witney College curriculum is an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) service that last met the **matrix** Standard in 2020.

Since this last assessment, the College has continued to evolve, with developments including a strengthened positioning of the Bicester Construction Skills Centre to meet local and regional skills needs and a restructuring of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision. The latter has resulted in strengthening the connectivity of the teams that are working across this specialist area, resulting in seamless bespoke support for recipients (hereafter 'learners' and/or 'students'), with strengthened staff communication, collaborative working, and resource planning.

A new 5 year Strategic Plan has also been developed since the last assessment and this lays out the College's intent and overarching strategic objectives for 2022 - 2027. This Plan was developed in a highly consultative way with students, staff, stakeholders and partner voices, alongside labour market information, shaping the plan into what is a very accessible document. At the heart of this new plan is the strategic objective of '*delivering the highest quality student experience*' with the expected outcome that the Abingdon and Witney College graduate is '*something special and leaves with more than a qualification*'. They are, to use the highly visible College strapline, equipped and empowered to '*Be You. Be Extraordinary*'.

## The Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

Bespoke IAG is the definitive service that enables the '*Be You. Be Extraordinary*' driver to be realised and it is clear that Abingdon and Witney College continues to prioritise the investment in ensuring a multi layered entitlement. IAG is well resourced, with the whole workforce playing a role in a service that underpins the student journey.

With an expectation that the delivery focus "*must be both realistic and ambitious, and that these two descriptors can co-exist*" staff brought to life an IAG experience that is student centred, objective and illustrative of the College's values of being authentic, bold, welcoming, inclusive and transformative.

Since the last assessment the marketing and admissions teams have strengthened pre entry IAG with "*consistent messaging and successful open days*". The rollout of Welcome Wednesdays are IAG centred and here there is a focus upon exploring college options and choices and with an array of staff at hand to "*widen and then refine options*" and "*create support plans that are centred upon inclusivity, and a you can achieve approach*". Staff across reception, student engagement and the business development recruitment teams illustrated high quality front line IAG skills in listening to potential students' ideas and plans and then conveying information on provision, additional learning support and funding and bursary options. United, these teams rightly made a claim to realising the 1,714 study programme recruitment target of 2022/2023 as well as illustrating how the current year milestone of 1,850 students is within reach.

IAG was at the heart of a planned "*radical disruption*" in the first term of the 2022/2023 academic year, where the whole college widened its approaches to embracing course changes and empowering students to enrol onto courses at a later date that historically had been the case. With a '*best interest of the learner*' approach and impartiality intact, the

College's 'SWOP' approach of course switching is in keeping with a culture that is welcoming of *"mistakes as learning for life experiences"*.

Safeguarding IAG is robust, with consistent and effective messaging and a resounding student viewpoint being captured of the College being *"a very safe place to be"*. Underpinning Safeguarding is the student voice provision which has continued to evolve across campuses and in recent months has been driving inclusive practices that have included *"more College wide conversations upon transgender and pronoun usage to widen safety and inclusivity"*. The Student Adviser role has matured over the last three years too with staff demonstrating an approach to welfare and pastoral support which learners are benefiting from.

An Abingdon and Witney College IAG experience is holistic, with curriculum staff and specialist teams ensuring provision for learning, employability, health and well-being and careers guidance. Where appropriate this is customised to meet specialist needs as in the case of the SEND support, with tutors and additional learning support practitioners integrating a package of IAG to progress learners to identified goals including those within their Education and Health Care Plans.

A suite of ten employability outcomes sits at the heart of the College's IAG career management skills which includes self-motivation, timekeeping, communication, problem solving and organisational skills. The College's work experience and industry placement provision is firmly focused upon instilling these skills and behaviours, and they are reviewed from the employer, staff and student perspective at pre-determined review points within the learner journey or placement.

Curriculum staff clearly described the role of their department in delivering the service, with consistency of understanding of the limitations of the role and how to source internal expertise as and when appropriate. Here, tutors were highlighting the added value that the student performance managers (SPM) bring to the learners through the roll out of the 'CORE' study programme and its four IAG outcomes of: money matters; keeping safe; loving your environment and personal development.

Careers advice and guidance continues to be well resourced, with three skilled advisers demonstrating how they reach out to students across all four campuses. Here the approach is one of sustained support that helps the full range of students develop career action plans. Monitoring of students' progress is a key feature of the support with the team connecting well to the industry placement team and tutors to explore how work experience has informed career planning. The careers strategy is well implemented and underpinned, with high quality career information materials and resources.

The IAG provision highlighted above has been designed and is intended to have applicability to apprentices who confirmed that they felt part of the College and this provision. In the main though apprentices are benefitting primarily from the IAG provided by training facilitators and assessors and their vocational sector expertise. This is applied through a well described mentoring approach to realise goals and plan future career development.

## The difference the IAG makes to recipients and the overall impact

Since the last assessment there has been a consistent strengthening of capturing IAG impact and wider development of outcome based practices. This is highly visible in the College's strapline of *'improving lives, communities and the economy through education'*. The investment in Power BI as a management information system has led to much data confidence with key managers, such as the admissions manager, highlighting how data scrutiny is working well and enabling celebration and recommendations for corrective action (where for instance there is a dip in attendance or performance). The College staff were united in making the connection between quality IAG and student outcomes.

At an individual level, students and apprentices were all keen to highlight their positive experiences of the College. All described feeling safe, happy, and supported with feedback that included:

*"From the reception staff to the tutors, they are all very friendly and really make me feel welcome on days when I might be feeling a little low, mood wise";*

*"I have really enjoyed being at the College and am thankful for all the extra support. I feel nervous but excited that I am moving on to a new college - I hope it's as supportive as this one";*

*"I have to single out the careers advisers as being especially supportive. My adviser really helped me to make good choices whilst at college and during the UCAS application process";*

*"The training centre is a really positive learning environment with messages about self-belief and aiming high. I appreciate the trainers' focus and approach on you as a person which they promote on the Apprentice of the Month displays".*

Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) continues to act as an impact framework for soft outcomes across adult and community learning and SEND provision, and learner surveys are adding additional examples of gained soft impact. These approaches are seen as vital to help evaluate learners, who commence college life with such a vast range of starting points, and achieve their goals and *'Be You. Be Extraordinary'*.

More broadly, the leadership team described how IAG is demonstrating a return on investment and contributing to the realisation of key performance indicators. For instance, the high profile open days, school engagement and wider marketing and promotion campaigns are seen as intrinsic to the over achievement of the recruitment target and the overarching achievement target.

The importance of economic and societal impact is highlighted within the Strategic Plan describing *'together, our programmes, skills development, social responsibility and citizenship enhance community cohesion and strengthen the economy'*. In bringing this to life the manager of adult and community learning evidenced a series of case studies and specific projects that are centred upon community outcomes. These included an 18 month outreach project at a hotel where Syrian refugees were



temporarily housed. Here, IAG support has been wide ranging and included health and well-being, life-skills and employability support. Case studies illustrate this team's roll out of IAG as an embedded component of its learning offer and contributory impact upon reduced loneliness, increased mobility, health and well-being, progression to employment and promotion of a sense of community. Employer responsiveness, especially relating to apprenticeship liaison, is informed by valid data sources including Oxfordshire LEP labour market information and through the business development team's dialogue with employers. The Bicester Construction Centre and soon to be launched Eco hub have been created with and for industry.

## What is working particularly well

A number of strengths/areas that are working particularly well were identified during the assessment, which are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- IAG has a high priority across the organization, with senior managers investing in the service as essential to the realisation of '*Be You. Be Extraordinary*' driver. Senior leaders frequently review and resource IAG provision which leads to staff benefiting from an array of training to ensure that delivery is current and representative of student needs. Deliverers of the service feel highly valued by managers and students as "*crucial to learner achievement*". (1.1, 7.2)
- The whole organisation focus upon IAG is implemented with effective and seamless connectivity of interventions. Staff work within the limitations of their role and ensure further support is accessed where appropriate. The result of this connectivity is that learner led IAG interventions build upon previous support and form a bespoke IAG journey. (4.2, 4.6)
- Throughout the assessment staff were united in describing how they feel well cared for, valued, and supported. The investment in well-being call outs, well-being champions and wellness action plans is equally applicable to staff and to students. These initiatives are understood and embedded within workforce development approaches. Staff are very proud of and enjoy working at the College. (1.4)
- Led by the Head of Student Services, the Safeguarding team ensures that all staff understand their roles and responsibilities in maintaining campus security, and that they know how to report a concern. IAG Safeguarding is deeply embedded, with newsletters, monthly Safeguarding tips and student guides keeping messaging transparent. This extends to students on industry placement and as a result students feel safe at College and in the workplace. (1.3)
- Across SEND, staff evidenced how they have "*high expectations for every learner*" and demonstrated how IAG support is "*scaffolding the learner journey*" with additional learning support, tutors and access to specialist equipment helping to remove barriers. The widening of assessment approaches from RARPA to include employability qualifications is centred upon stretching and challenging, with the IAG scaffolding in turn raising aspirations. This IAG practice is illustrative of the

Strategic Plan's *'Together, we achieve the extraordinary'*. (1.2)

- Bespoke approaches are central to the *'Abingdon and Witney College IAG way'* with managers, staff and learners describing how the learner journey framework is monitored and adapted to meet changing needs. This was well described across Early Years and Childcare. Here staff feel empowered to adapt and restructure key components of the learner journey to keep it aspirational yet realistic to the student's situation and needs. For instance, staff provide additional one to one coaching support to help students with low confidence to feel work experience ready, with enhanced structured support helping the completion of work placements. (4.2, 4.5)

## Development suggestions

Development suggestions are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement and a way for an Assessor to add value e.g., where the service is of a high quality, development areas are offered to help the service be even better than it already is, or to give insight into practices seen elsewhere. There is no correlation between the number of strengths and development suggestions. Where development areas are greater in number this is not intended to indicate that the information, advice and guidance service is in any way lacking. These will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) conducted twelve and twenty-four months from the date of this Assessment, along with any other notable developments. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- Such is the richness of the College's IAG offer that the organisation is encouraged to reflect upon defining and describing the breadth of service as part of a full description. This would be distinct from the Careers Strategy and help staff across the whole organisation to further see how the IAG experience is broader than careers advice and guidance and is multi-tiered, with learning, well-being and life outcomes. In keeping any developed description visual and upbeat (as per the Strategic Plan), all stakeholders could then see the dynamic, end to end IAG offer that frames the student journey. (3.1)
- With clear messaging that *"as a college we don't want to stand still"*, the organisation is encouraged to maintain and extend staff IAG competencies to support the workforce in this role. For instance, across the business development team and industry placement team, postholders are likely to benefit from nationally recognised employability practitioner/IAG qualifications. (2.5)
- Job descriptions are in place for all staff, and it was noted that these are currently in the process of being reviewed. As part of this review the organisation is encouraged to reflect upon embedding the IAG knowledge, experience, and qualifications for key roles. For instance, within the Industry Placement Coordinator role, existing staff in this post highlighted a need to more explicitly feature group IAG delivery as an accountability. Taking this action will help future

applicants understand the blend of one to one and group based IAG approaches within the role. (2.2)

- Across the College's learning offer it is clear that action planning practices are working appropriately, with staff monitoring the learner journey and students clear on their progress to date and future targets. Within Higher Education a Professional Development Plan (PDP) takes place annually with a focus upon career goals and applying the recently gained skills to the workplace. A sample review of PDPs suggests that this document, along with staff training in its completion, is worth actioning to help raise its profile and ensure the plan celebrates gained soft outcomes and is setting aspirational career development goals for the year ahead. (2.5, 4.5)
- Feedback from employer facing teams highlighted effective relationship management and support to industry. Looking ahead the College is encouraged to support these staff to develop evaluation approaches that help to further evidence how the organisation is impacting upon priority skills needs of Oxfordshire. By taking this forward managers and staff will have the confidence to showcase not only the College's impact upon apprentices and individual employers but also the wider sector and economy. (6.2)



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2. During the period of accreditation satisfy The Growth Company that the organisation continues to meet the requirements of the **matrix** Standard via the annual continuous improvement checks and the three-year accreditation review.
3. Complete annual continuous improvement checks in a timely way, it is expected these will be carried out annually by the accreditation anniversary date.
4. Inform The Growth Company or their Assessor if the key contact name/contact details change.
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