Abingdon and Witney College

The **matrix** Standard is delivered by The Growth Company
on behalf of the Department for Education.
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Assessment Information

Assessment Type	Accreditation Review
Assessor's Decision	Standard Met (subject to deferred evidence gathering)
Assessor's Name	Stuart McRill
Visit Date	18/05/2020 – 21/05/2020 (3.5 days)
Client ID	C13457
Assessment Reference	PN200187
Continuous Improvement Check Year 1 due by	21/05/2021
Continuous Improvement Check Year 2 due by	21/05/2022
Accreditation Review onsite visit to be conducted by	21/05/2023

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Organisation – Introduction, Aims, Objectives and Outcomes

Abingdon and Witney College is a medium sized further education college based on three main campuses and providing a curriculum offer of vocational, professional, and technical training to young people and adults throughout Oxfordshire. The college last met the **matrix** Standard in May 2017 and, in embracing the annual continuous improvement checks, has made effective use of the Standard across the whole organisation to refresh and develop Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) provision.

IAG is a core entitlement that is at the heart of an Abingdon and Witney College learner journey, providing end to end support for a diverse learner base across a broad curriculum offer. The learning provision includes education programmes for young people aged 14-16 and 16-19; adult learning programmes which include adult and community learning through the Oxfordshire Adult Learning contract; apprenticeship frameworks and standards; and some higher education provision.

The organisation's IAG provision is seen by the senior leadership team as holistic with all staff contributing to its delivery. The result is that the service is multi layered and content rich, encompassing the full breadth of learning, work, career and life skills support that is needed to help each and every learner achieve their goals. An end to end IAG strategy is centred upon a '*right student, right level, right course*' approach, with marketing colleagues, work experience coordinators, mentors, the learning centre and student voice teams all making significant contributions to the service. These are in addition to the following:

Staff providing pre-entry and induction support – this takes the form of school liaison, admissions/enrolment advice and bursary and student finance staff working seamlessly to ascertain whether a programme at Abingdon and Witney College is in the best interests of the learner and, if so, the most appropriate level and any additional support needs;

Careers advisers – a team that has seen increased staffing resources since the last assessment, with advisers implementing more one to one and group careers advice and guidance. Increased resources have brought new practices, with the team instrumental in providing triage training to curriculum staff. With a mantra of *'careers not courses'* the intended impact of the triage training is to capacity build and embed the careers strategy in each faculty;

Student performance managers (SPMs) - a team implementing a dual role of one to one and group IAG across the college's faculties. Working in close partnership with the curriculum managers the SPM meets frequently with a caseload of students to help keep them on target with their learning and focuses upon attendance and punctuality. Additionally, the team delivers key workshops across the study programme, known internally as ' CORE';

Students advisers – a team that described their role as implementing a "*well-being listening service that is driven by the needs of the student*". Usually delivered by face to face support on wide-ranging areas including anxiety, relationships, and housing, this service has evolved in recent weeks to include remote IAG. The team also play a core role in implementing college wide safeguarding practices;

Curriculum tutors– across each faculty is an understanding of the importance of the tutor in equipping students with the support needed to achieve their qualification and progress their wider goals. Vocational tutors weave live briefs, work experience and employer masterclasses into their programme;

Business development executives, training coordinators and assessors – these three clearly defined roles provide pre-entry, on programme and end point assessment readiness support across apprenticeship provision;

Staff providing additional learning support – a service of individualised support for students with a range of additional support needs including those with profound and multiple needs and students with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) and Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP);

Throughout the assessment managers and delivery staff clearly described how IAG is viewed as an essential feature of provision and a key enabler to realise key performance indicators (KPIs). This was evidenced through a range of monitoring and evaluation datasets. KPI meetings are deep rooted across faculties and championed by a team of quality leads and ultimately the vice principal quality and curriculum. This quality infrastructure has been successful in equipping managers across each faculty with the evidence base to take improvement action and celebrate achievement, recognising that the faculty-specific approach in turn contributes to the cross college milestones.

IAG provided by SPMs and student advisers is seen as "*central to the achievement of the attendance target*" which stands at 85%, a target that has been realised for the last three years with gradual increases from 89.83% (2016/17) to 90.01% (2017/18) and 90.64% (2018/19). Across apprenticeships, training coordinators and assessors made a direct correlation to their IAG delivery at learner reviews and the overarching 80% achievement KPI. This target was surpassed in 2018/19, with 83% achievement across frameworks. Throughout, staff highlighted that performance is consistently at or near target and that IAG is central to this success, with one manager explaining how the Work Placement Capacity and Delivery Fund (CDF) milestone of 63 work placements was achieved in 2018/19 *"thanks to the work experience and industry placement team supporting learners so well on placement"*.

Abingdon and Witney College is a forward looking organisation and proactively seeks out new developments. This is illustrated with the college's early adoption and college wide implementation of the study programme and more recently the development and shaping of T Levels and roll out of Microsoft Teams for staff and then learners in 2019. For every new project IAG is factored into its design and was well illustrated by the vice principal quality and curriculum when describing the intent, implement, impact approach practices for projects.

Implementation of the CORE study programme is steeped in IAG and sees the SPMs and curriculum staff work together to bring about a programme that year on year has been refreshed. The head of study programme and the team of SPMs illustrated the range of IAG activities across the curriculum. Along with English and maths support, the team is creative, keeping their programme fresh and relevant. A sample of workshop content confirmed this with newly produced resources, which were upbeat, accessible and fun. In delivering and shaping the programme and its implementation there is a key emphasis on the student voice, with one manager explaining:

"We call it the 'Beyoncé model' where the student is at the centre of the study programme experience and we help them to design it… and so we are in effect their entourage!"

Service delivery approaches were brought to life by every team. Importantly, staff were very clear on their role and its boundaries, with signposting and referral an everyday feature and well recorded across the Promonitor platform. Careers advisers are much valued across the college for their implementation of a *"dynamic careers programme of events and workshops that reaches out to students and parents".*

Health and well-being IAG is delivered by all staff whilst support for SEND students has an effective specialist team. Here, managers and a learner support team help Pathway learners to acquire and develop independent living skills and help with progression pathways into supported internships and the Fast Forward programme.

In taking place during the COVID -19 pandemic tutors brought to life how IAG delivery through digital engagement is currently the norm. With safeguarding and quality assurance rigour factored into this mode of implementation, staff evidenced competency in supporting the full range of Abingdon and Witney students. One tutor, in describing approaches to support some students with autism, highlighted how joined up practices with "*the amazing expertise of our additional learner support team*" have helped provide stability and structure to the learners, helping to reduce their anxiety. He continued, "*we are determined that even with lockdown, all our students will leave with new skills but also options for their future".*

Although no learners were interviewed for this assessment due to the difficulties presented by the coronavirus pandemic, the organisation provided an array of evidence that brought to life IAG impact. Outcome based practices have developed since the last assessment and today these are clearly defined at each individual team and service level and then effectively captured through a blended monitoring and evaluation methodology. A review of this evidence confirmed how IAG delivery is making a difference to learners. One well embedded outcome practice sits at the core of Promonitor with curriculum staff exploring overarching defined soft outcomes including punctuality, team work, self-awareness and communication. Elsewhere the use of learner surveys captures impact on students feeling safe (98% at the most recent survey), with the team of student advisers understandably making a convincing claim to contributing to this outcome. Across apprenticeships, reviews conducted by training coordinators capture acquired and future intended skills and behaviours. These are recorded on an ongoing basis within individual learning plans. Adult learning uses the well-established Recognising and Recording Progression and Achievement (RARPA) framework to record impact on: learners' confidence to develop their current skills to a higher level or to learn new skills; feeling more empowered to take on new challenges; social interaction; and physical/ mental health. These are captured within the learner record which serves as the individual learning plan. This learner record also reviews progress made against personal defined outcomes.

A final soft outcome practice which is important to highlight relates to IAG provided throughout industry placements. Here the staff provide support in helping students to recognise their performance against defined employability attributes such as resilience, adaptability, problem solving and self-motivation. As the placement unfurls so too does the reflection of the extent to which these and other attributes are being progressed. They are brought together with a celebration of recognised skills and behaviours in the format of a My Skills Report.

In summary, this assessment confirmed that Abingdon and Witney College continues to provide high quality and outcome based IAG across all its provision. The organisation is firmly committed to continuous quality improvement and is making very effective use of the **matrix** Standard to quality assure IAG delivery and so realise its strapline to '*change lives and communities'*.

Strengths

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

- At the heart of the college is an especially well managed, multi-tiered quality infrastructure. This is deeply embedded across the faculties by a faculty specific quality lead to realise the quality improvement plan and wider organisation KPIs. The seamless partnership of the quality lead and the curriculum managers is working well and evaluates all features of the learner journey. An added tier of support provided by the student performance managers brings with it an operational IAG role that inspires and motivates a caseload of students to develop punctuality, attendance and personal development skills and so keep students' performance on track, and in turn meet the KPIs. (1.2, 4.1, 4.5)

- The assessment highlighted the extent to which the leadership team is supporting its workforce throughout the challenges of remote working during COVID-19. Staff were effusive about the effective communication, steer and inclusivity that is working well across campuses. This cultural approach pre-dates the recent lockdown period, with the 2019 staff survey highlighting around 90% of the workforce citing feeling empowered, listened to and respected. The backdrop of the assessment in taking place during mental health awareness week provided additional mood lifting communications to staff and students which were clearly appreciated. (1.2, 1.7)

- Embedded IAG is implemented with quality and conviction to achieve positive student outcomes. This well resourced provision is grounded upon the learner centred approach and a *'careers not courses'* mantra and adopts a holistic approach that is a perfect fit with the **matrix** Standard focus upon learning, work, career and life goals. Although the students themselves were not directly contributing to the assessment there was a richness of evidence in the form of testimonials, individual learning plans and success evaluation. Each specialist support team works cross college and was particularly well showcased with careers advisers describing their triage training for tutors across the faculties. (3.2)

- Pre-entry IAG support is of a high standard, with the admissions team, student advisers and careers advisers demonstrating agility and responsiveness in their outward facing support to make a difference and connect potential learners to a future pathway. Examples of effective implementation included an admission panel that is solution based and successfully manages to provide realism and relevance to students yet maintaining their aspirations and dreams. Agility and responsiveness have overcome the challenges of recruitment during the COVID-19 lockdown. Here, the teams have produced a series of taster packs, giving insight to help students more fully understand the course expectations and, where remote interviews are taking place, they are preceded with friendly electronic handouts / briefs that demystify the college telephone interview process and explain about adult learner support options in a friendly manner. (2.2, 3.2)

- Staff spoke frequently about *'student at the heart'* approaches to service delivery, an approach that student advisers and curriculum staff brought to life with particular skill. IAG delivery is steeped in professional practice with staff benefiting from training in safeguarding, equality diversity and inclusion and providing IAG with dignity and respect. IAG frameworks have matured since the last assessment, with each team demonstrating a consistent understanding of their IAG limitations and the benefits of signposting students to benefit from internal colleagues' expertise. This was especially well evidenced by staff who are supporting students with SEND and also Looked After Children (LAC) where pastoral support during

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the lockdown period has been a high priority to foster continued learning whilst also helping to provide some focus and structure to those learners feeling especially anxious. (1.3, 2.4, 3.2)

- Innovation and continuous quality improvement are hand in glove at Abingdon and Witney College. Early adoption of Microsoft Teams (most staff were competently using the solution in 2019) has seen this digital platform develop into the student virtual learning environment. Key managers are shaping national education skills and development in digital learning and the shaping of T Levels, with a focus upon embedding IAG at the heart of planned implementation. This was well evidenced when managers and delivery staff showcased the IAG content for industry placements to maximise its impact on students' employability skills. (4.7, 4.8)

- Throughout the assessment the full range of delivery teams provided access to IAG resources that have been developed internally. These are all of a high quality and included curriculum content for the CORE programme, new learner starter packs and industry placement workshop materials. Reviewed and refreshed annually these resources are accessible, inclusive, upbeat, and consistently reference the wider IAG service as a source of further help and support. (2.2, 3.5)

Areas for Development

Areas for development 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 to practice seen elsewhere. There is no correlation between the number of strengths and areas for development. Where development areas are greater in number this is not intended to indicate that the information, advice and guidance service is in anyway 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.

- Learners were unable to make a direct contribution to the assessment due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly their contribution is intrinsic to an outcome based and person centred IAG service. This will be addressed at the 12 month CIC where a sample of students, representing the breadth of the curriculum, will directly contribute to the accreditation cycle. (4.8)

- Feedback from some staff suggested that marketing and promotion of the post 19 bursary to students, but also to curriculum staff, might help to reduce financial barriers that many adults face and so maintain the high levels of retention and achievement. More broadly there were also some suggestions that higher education pathways could be more seamlessly woven into level 3 provision. Providing this is explored objectively with an impartial *'best interests of the student'* approach, increased visibility here may help to grow the level 4 provision. (1.6)

- With training coordinators and assessors clearly implementing their role within Apprenticeship Standards there is now an opportunity to strengthen apprenticeship linkages to the whole college IAG offer. For instance, those apprenticeship candidates who have not been successful at the recruitment stage are likely to benefit from signposting to the careers adviser team to explore broader options and choices to help maintain their motivation. Elsewhere, given that the training coordinators are key to the support continuum for apprentices, these staff are encouraged to become more familiar with and utilise the college's IAG rich offer to support their caseload. This will ensure parity of access and inclusion for those apprentices who may only be attending college for one day a week but may need expertise from the student advisers etc. (3.2, 3.6)

- The development, promotion and implementation of the careers programme not only links to the Gatsby Benchmarks but also highlights the key features of careers advice and guidance provision to inform students, parents, and staff of the offer. This programme would benefit from a review over the summer months to help prioritise those key features of the programme that were not maximised in 2019/20. Such prioritisation could help ensure that activities such as the Mock Interviews event with local employers is well attended by students and maximising the volunteer contributions from industry. (2.1, 3.2, 4.8)

- Student advisers are keen to build upon their successes to date and introduce more group work across the curriculum. Group IAG can be especially effective in embedding provision across curriculum areas and is also likely to help optimise resources. The team has already identified some key themes, including exam anxiety, that could translate well to group workshop provision. (2.1, 3.2)

- With all careers advisers having been trained to at least a Level 6 qualification in careers advice and guidance, there is no question of their competency. There is however scope to strengthen quality assurance practices across this team. As part of this approach the

organisation is encouraged to consider developing an observation framework against a defined IAG model and then implementing line manager or peer observations. Taking such action is likely to help refresh and share good practices. Once developed, the framework in turn could then be modified and rolled out across other IAG teams such as the student advisers. (2.4, 4.5, 4.6)

The annual **matrix** Continuous Improvement Check will allow the organisation to demonstrate on an ongoing basis the developments they are continuing to make in order to support individuals. These may include the Areas for Development above. http://matrixstandard.com/continuous-improvement-checks/.

Please note that annual Continuous Improvement Checks are mandatory and non-completion within the required timescale will impact on the organisation's accreditation, please see the section Assessment Information for dates.

Methodology

This accreditation review, in taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic, was conducted remotely with the following methods used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process.

One-to-one interviews (utilising Microsoft Teams) with members of the leadership team (8)

One-to-one interviews (utilising Microsoft Teams) with staff delivering the service (30)

One to one telephone discussions with partners (2)

A review of planning, service delivery and evaluation documentation, including: Strategic Plan 2019/20; overarching self-assessment report and quality improvement plan; policies and procedures; student and staff survey evaluation reports and some sampling of college produced information resources

Decision and feedback meeting (utilising Microsoft Teams)

Abingdon and Witney College wholly embraced the remote nature of this accreditation review and showed much competency and experience in utilising the Microsoft Teams platform to provide evidence. Throughout, staff were proactive and responsive in showcasing an evidence rich assessment and celebrating the strategic objective of the college '*being an employer of choice'*.

Conditions of Accreditation

Holders of the **matrix** Standard Accreditation must:

1. Maintain and continually improve upon their services.

2. Throughout 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.

5. Submit their Booking Form for re-accreditation to the **matrix** Standard at least 3 months prior to the accreditation anniversary date ensuring all pre on-site activity is completed in a timely way including planning, payment and interview scheduling. Accreditation Reviews are due 3 years from the anniversary accreditation date; it is expected that organisations will be assessed by this date or will risk being de-accredited.

6. Inform The Growth Company of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email: matrixStandard@growthco.uk.

7. Inform The Growth Company immediately if they wish to extend or reduce the scope of their accreditation.

8. Inform The Growth Company of any serious complaint or rise in numbers of complaints received (within the scope of the accreditation).

9. Not undertake or omit to undertake any activity that may be misleading and/or may cause The Growth Company and/or the **matrix** Standard to be brought into disrepute.

10. Only use the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark for the areas within the scope of the accreditation and in accordance with the guidelines. For example, if a certain department is successfully **matrix** accredited, the Quality Mark can only be used on that department's letterhead or on that department's page on their internet homepage.

11. Ensure in cases where accreditation is withdrawn or where they do not come forward for accreditation review, remove from display any certificates or plaques issued by The Growth Company and do not display the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark nor refer to be a former holder of the **matrix** Standard.

12. Be aware that The Growth Company reserves the right to remove any accreditation and/or certification previously applied if payment is not received for services provided.