

Inspection of Ada, the National College for Digital Skills

Inspection dates: 14 to 17 March 2023

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Good
Education programmes for young people	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

Ada National College for Digital Skills is a specialist technical college that aims to provide pathways into careers in the digital industry. It has a particular focus on attracting more females and more individuals from disadvantaged and minority ethnic backgrounds. It is named after Ada Lovelace, a nineteenth-century pioneer of computers and programming. The college has three campuses. The sixth-form campus is located in Tottenham Hale, in north east London, and the apprenticeship programmes are taught in Whitechapel, in east London, and in Manchester.

At the time of the inspection, there were 124 students aged 16 to 19 enrolled on level 3 study programmes at the sixth-form campus, 262 apprentices on programmes from level 4 to 6, and fewer than five students with high needs. The apprenticeships are aligned to the level 4 foundation degree and level 6 degree programmes approved by the Open University. All students on level 3 study programmes take a BTEC National Diploma in computer science.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Leaders and managers have created an exceptional enrichment programme. Students can choose from a wide range of activities, including chess, disk jockey skills, art, climbing and teaching computing to children from a local primary school. Students thoroughly enjoy these sessions and participate well.

Leaders have developed an excellent coaching programme for sixth-form students. Students benefit from receiving one-to-one coaching from an industry professional who has a good understanding of their motivations and career goals. Through the programme, students gain an excellent insight into the world of work in addition to receiving impartial and highly valuable advice about pathways into employment.

Students and apprentices learn in an environment that is positive and supportive. Staff are respectful of the identities and individual differences of students and apprentices. For example, from the outset, they know which gender pronouns students and apprentices use. Students and apprentices benefit from the strong sense of community that staff work hard to create.

Students receive the support they need to develop their English skills. For example, they develop note taking skills during lessons in which teachers insist that computers are closed so that notes are handwritten. Students recognise the importance of speaking and writing clearly and fluently for business purposes. As a result, their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills improve.

Managers and teachers work frequently with employers to ensure that students develop the knowledge and skills required by the digital sector. All students work on industry projects. For example, students in A-level mathematics use the data analysis skills that replicate job roles on prestigious financial projects. Computing students work on sustainability and e-waste projects designed by staff and large employers. Students develop skills that are highly valued by employers.

Staff use information from assessments well to adapt their curriculum approaches and address any identified gaps in learning. For example, they reorganise computing classes to give students with lower attainment more examination practise. Students with higher attainment benefit from more practise in skills application and wider exposure to software not included in the examination. As a result, students benefit from a curriculum that is designed to meet their needs.

Staff link well the topics that they teach to components of the BTEC National Diploma programme, where relevant. For example, A-level psychology teachers relate forensic psychology to the topic of cybercrime. This enables students to make useful connections between different components of the courses they study.

Staff make frequent links between the topics that students and apprentices learn and British values. For example, students are able to recall and talk confidently about tolerance, individual liberty and the rule of law in the context of technology. Apprentices learn how to protect themselves from the risks associated with extremism and

radicalisation at the start of their programmes and through the mandatory training that they receive in the workplace.

Students and apprentices receive good individual support from their teachers. For example, skills coaches build professional relationships with apprentices that focus on individual progress, and they provide the right level and frequency of support. Staff frequently review the targets in the education, health and care plans of students with high needs. As a result of the support that they receive, apprentices and students make sustained progress over time.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a strong contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders and managers work effectively with stakeholders in Manchester and London. They receive good support from the chair of the Greater Manchester Local Enterprise Partnership. They are involved in the Manchester Digital Strategy and are core partners in the Greater Manchester Institute of Technology. In London, they are regular contributors at various technology industry events, such as London Tech Advocates. They are also involved in a number of employer representative groups. Leaders' and managers' active engagement with a range of stakeholders ensures that they understand and have a good strategic overview of the skills needs in both of the regions in which they operate.

Leaders and managers actively seek employers' views about the curriculum and gain a good understanding of the skills needed by employers. For example, managers adapted their apprenticeships to include cloud computing following employer feedback. Managers also revised the computer science curriculum to include a greater focus on students' spoken and written communication as a result of employer feedback. Consequently, staff are assured that each curriculum remains focused on the skills that employers need most.

Leaders and managers actively engage employers in the design and teaching of their curriculum. High-profile companies contribute to the design of projects that apprentices complete at the start of their programme. For example, apprentices complete projects that involve collecting data and market insights for a holiday letting company. Representatives from a local higher education institution teach computing students about copyright law for computer games design. Consequently, students and apprentices learn skills that are industry-relevant and current.

Leaders and managers have strong and active relationships with a diverse range of employers across the country. Employers are very positive about these relationships and are strong advocates of the college. They highly value the knowledge, skills and behaviours that apprentices acquire at the college.

College governors understand well the digital skills deficit that the college aims to reduce through its curriculum. They challenge leaders and managers on the robustness of their plans effectively, ensuring that leaders and managers meet the needs of the areas in which they operate.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders, managers and teachers give very careful consideration to the content of each course. They review content frequently and, on the apprenticeship programme, often in response to the feedback that they receive from employers. As a result, students and apprentices develop knowledge and skills that are current and industry-relevant.

Leaders and managers work collaboratively with a range of industry experts to design and teach a curriculum that reflects current and future business needs in the digital industry. Students particularly enjoy the industry-led projects they are set throughout their programmes. Students develop important industry-focused skills that prepare them well for the workplace.

Staff thoughtfully organise and sequence the curriculum to enable students and apprentices to build their knowledge and then apply it in practical situations. For example, students in year 1 of the BTEC National Diploma computer science course first learn about the fundamental principles of computing. In year 2, they extend their knowledge by learning how to apply computing solutions to businesses, taking account of financial, social, legal and ethical factors. Apprentices learn about the fundamental principles of project management before they design their own projects, and they then work in teams to present them to their lecturers and employers.

Teachers set high expectations for students regarding the submission of homework and assignments. For example, students in computer science understand how to structure a report clearly, including contents, introduction, references and appendices. As a result, students submit work of a high standard.

Leaders and managers provide high-quality and impartial careers advice and guidance, which enables students to make progress and move on to a higher level of qualification, employment or further training. Students receive guidance about applications to higher education, information about degree apprenticeships and interview practise from employers. Apprentices attend workshops that teach them how to create a professional online profile, have end-point assessment interview practise, and receive careers support if they are facing redundancy. As a result, students and apprentices get the right level of careers education they need to make informed choices about their next steps.

Staff set high expectations for attendance, punctuality and behaviour. Lecturers remind apprentices about the expectations for starting on time, staying in class until the end of the session and being respectful to their peers. Students study in calm and orderly learning environments. As a result, students and apprentices develop the professional behaviours needed for work and enhance these behaviours if they are already in work.

Leaders have an active and strong relationship with their board of governors. The board includes members with a wide range of expertise in education and technology. Governors

have a clear oversight of the strategic direction of the college, ensure that resources are well managed and hold leaders to account for their actions.

Staff have a very secure process for recruiting students with high needs to the college. They make effective use of existing education, health and care plans and annual reviews to understand the challenges that students may face, the support that they have previously received and the support that they need at the college. Staff agree purposeful targets for students and share these with teachers and support staff. As a result, staff have a good understanding of how to support students with high needs.

Teachers' use of strategies to challenge students to deepen their knowledge and to provide more inspiring lessons is not consistently effective. Many teachers are highly adept at using questioning techniques to provide challenge to students in carefully time-bound situations to quicken and deepen thinking. However, a few teachers do not make effective use of the lesson time to encourage students to reach a deep or challenging level of thinking. In these instances, students' discussions lack depth, and their contributions are often confined to short answers.

Staff do not consistently provide students and apprentices with feedback that helps them to improve. For example, in the sixth form, there is too much variation in the quality of feedback that teachers give, and a few apprentices receive feedback that is not helpful enough or is late.

Leaders have experienced a number of staff changes. In the sixth form, this disruption has impacted on the quality of students' experience on a few programmes. Leaders are aware of this and are addressing it. It is too early, however, to assess the full impact of the effectiveness of their strategies on the overall quality of students' experience.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The designated safeguarding lead for each campus and their deputies are all suitably qualified and experienced to carry out their roles.

All staff undergo mandatory training during induction, and this is refreshed every two years. The college has effective links with the local council, and there is a clear referral process in place for students who need particular types of support.

Those who are responsible for recruitment adhere strictly to safer recruitment practices and complete all the required checks.

Staff provide students with extensive information about staying safe in college and how to protect themselves from potential risks outside. Students know to whom they should report any concerns. As a result, students are safe in learning, including when working online.

What does the provider need to improve?

- Ensure that the quality of feedback given to students and apprentices is of a consistently high quality.
- Ensure that the quality of teachers' questions to check learning and challenge students is consistently high across all programmes.

Provider details

Unique reference number 143540

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Website	www.ada.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Mark Smith
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	9 to 12 October 2018
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the chief operating officer and dean, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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