



Department  
for Education

# **FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment Summary Report: Ruskin College**

**February 2023**

## Contents

Background	3
Conclusion/executive summary	4
Recommendations	4
Review of recent developments in governance and leadership	5
Review of recent developments with curriculum and quality	6
Recent developments with college financial health and performance	8
Review of previous financial year outturn (2021/22)	8
Review of current year financial performance to date	8
Review of forward years financial performance	8
Assessment of cash / liquidity position	8
Review of recent development with estates and capital plans	8
Appendix A – Interviewees	10
Appendix B – Documents reviewed	11

## Background

<b>Name of College</b>	Ruskin College
<b>UKPRN</b>	10005583
<b>Name of College Principal /CEO</b>	Prof Peter John CBE
<b>Name of College Chair</b>	Helena Peacock
<b>Type of provision</b>	Specialist Designated Institution
<b>Date of visit</b>	3 February 2023
<b>Type of visit</b>	Intervention assessment (onsite)
<b>Trigger for formal intervention</b>	Ofsted inadequate grade for overall effectiveness
<b>Further Education Commissioner (FEC) Team members</b>	Andrew Tyley - FEC Deputy Pauline Hagen - FEC Adviser
<b>Location</b>	Headington, Oxford
<b>Apprenticeship training provider</b>	No
<b>Latest Ofsted inspection grade</b>	October 2022
<b>Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) Financial Health Grade</b>	Inadequate 2020/21 (confirmed) Good 2021/22 (self-assessment)
<b>Structural history/recent mergers</b>	Acquisition by the University of West London on 30 July 2021 as a wholly owned subsidiary
<b>Special considerations</b>	Residential accommodation onsite

## Conclusion/executive summary

Since its acquisition by the University of West London (UWL) in July 2021, Ruskin College has made important progress in improving its financial performance after years of decline and contraction.

There is a clear educational vision for the college (the “skills escalator”) that builds on the Ruskin tradition of widening participation through a portfolio of further education (FE) and higher education (HE) programmes, though there are some gaps in the current curriculum offer that limit opportunities for students to progress.

Governors and senior leaders recognise that rebuilding the provision from the low base inherited on acquisition may take time. Challenges remain to grow FE provision to make best use of the funding available for the benefit of students and to secure sustainability.

Leaders and managers acknowledge the weaknesses, identified by the recent Ofsted inspection, that have triggered intervention. They describe the impact as galvanising them to take rapid action on safeguarding and compliance coupled with more bespoke policies and training. Students we met valued the support they get and confirmed they feel safe in college.

Proposals are well advanced to establish a new Ruskin College quality group, which should provide a more focussed mechanism to monitor and enhance the quality of provision.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** The Ruskin Board should ensure that the recent steps to strengthen safeguarding policy and practice are effective and instil a culture of continuous improvement. **Target date: immediate and ongoing**

**Recommendation 2:** The proposed quality group should, as one of its early priorities, ensure that the self-assessment, quality improvement and post-inspection plans set out more detailed actions and milestones to demonstrate progress, impact and pace. **Target date: immediate and ongoing**

**Recommendation 3:** Senior leaders should ensure that the Ruskin College forward curriculum plan for 2023/24 demonstrates clearer and more coherent progression pathways alongside more ambitious targets for growth in FE provision. **Target date: May 2023 or earlier**

The above recommendations will inform a Single Improvement Plan (SIP) to be agreed jointly by the college, the FE Commissioner (FEC) team and the Department

for Education (DfE) territorial team as the basis for monitoring of progress during intervention. The FEC team will explore support as part of the SIP, including:

- National Leader of Governance (NLG) support to the Ruskin board chair
- Peer support from institutions with similar student intakes, on aspects including curriculum planning and funding, additional support and safeguarding
- FE Adviser support on self-assessment and quality improvement planning

The FE Commissioner will review and confirm the timing of any further stocktakes, taking into account the outcome of the Ofsted monitoring visit and progress against the SIP.

## **Review of recent developments in governance and leadership**

The Ruskin board comprises 9 trustees, all of whom are also members of the UWL further education board. The board is chaired by 1 of the 3 independent governors, with membership including the principal, deputy principal, two academics, the interim campus services manager and a student member (currently vacant). There is a safeguarding lead governor, and since the Ofsted inspection online training on safeguarding has been provided for all governors.

The UWL group FE board, which meets 3 time a year, includes Ruskin board business in its report to the UWL board. Governance support is provided by the interim university secretary. Governance arrangements are still evolving to ensure effective oversight, monitoring and challenge. As a way of further deepening the board chair's understanding of the specific FE dimension to Ruskin's provision, the FE Commissioner is happy to offer support from one of the National Leaders of Governance.

College leadership is organised around a central directorate working out of UWL and providing strategic oversight of key college functions. This enables the college to draw upon the expertise and capacity of the university in the key areas of quality, finance, estates, information, student services, safeguarding and HR, with course and programme leadership located in the college. Leaders may need to re-appraise the effectiveness of this structure as student numbers grow. In practice, the college lacks a middle tier of college-based leadership for functions such as quality and curriculum, and for areas of weakness identified in the October 2022 inspection such as information, advice and guidance (IAG) and progression. An interim postholder for campus services has responsibility as the deputy designated safeguarding lead, with specific responsibility for Prevent. This post is not permanent, and a decision will need to be made to ensure that rapid and sustained progress in safeguarding is secured through a permanent post based in the college.

Leaders have responded swiftly to concerns from inspectors about slow progress and lack of effective challenge in areas of quality assurance and safeguarding. A new Ruskin College quality group is due to be approved shortly, with a remit to monitor and enhance the quality of provision. Membership is drawn from senior leaders and staff but with a formal reporting line into UWL's FE and Apprenticeships committee. This is a welcome initiative that will support robust progress monitoring and strengthen accountability.

Further consideration should be given to widening the terms of reference to embrace aspects of curriculum planning, as well as holding leaders to account for quality improvement and challenging information presented to the group, with a clear link into the Ruskin board. This will support a clear and common understanding of progress in areas for improvement identified by inspectors.

As part of UWL's oversight of risk management, there is a specific group risk register for Ruskin College that identifies 15 strategic risks and 4 specific Ruskin College risks. The risks for regulatory compliance and safeguarding are rated red in light of the Ofsted inspection outcome. Both of these issues were considered at length at the last Ruskin board and should continue to be monitored rigorously by trustees to seek assurance that recent changes to safeguarding policies and practice are effective and that the college can demonstrate a culture of continuous improvement.

## **Review of recent developments with curriculum and quality**

Ruskin College's mission is clearly reflected in provision which meets the needs of students seeking a second chance in their education and training, whether in community learning, access to HE or online trade union (TU) studies. So far in the academic year 2022/23 there are 34 students on access to nursing, health and social care and social sciences, 137 on community learning courses and 803 enrolled on TU studies online learning. Provision is delivered from both the main campus and community venues. Work is underway through the "skills escalator" to strengthen progression for students and position the college to contribute to skills needs. College leaders are committed to growing both student numbers and the curriculum, and view access provision as one of the main vehicles for this, rather than community provision. This may be challenging given the drop in access numbers from 2021 to 2022 (from 46 to 34). Growth in access will be crucial to the college's ambition to meet skills needs, build stakeholder relationships including the local skills improvement plan (LSIP) and Oxford Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP), and to establish pathways from access into HE.

The October 2022 inspection report identified strengths in the quality of teaching and the expertise of tutors. Students make good progress and attend well. This is reflected in the progression of access students, their retention, attendance and achievement. Access students' feedback during the FEC visit was overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the learning journey, and all those interviewed had been well-informed and advised on their progression to HE. Students value the skills and knowledge of their tutors. Students recalled specific sessions on safeguarding and Prevent which had been delivered at the start of the course, and were confident in what action to take. Leaders could consider delivering safeguarding sessions throughout the learning journey, widening the scope and reach of these to raise awareness of the risks and threats in sections 7.1 and 7.2 of the safeguarding policy. This will support the embedding of a safeguarding culture and strengthen the college's response to the serious weaknesses in this area identified in the October 2022 inspection report.

College leaders have responded to the weaknesses in the report at pace, developing improvement plans which will start to drive a culture of continuous improvement. It is important that leaders recognise these plans as a starting point, and that establishing processes for monitoring and measuring progress will be key to secure and sustained improvement. Aspects of the Post-Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) should be re-visited to ensure that actions are linked to measurable impact. The safeguarding section of the PIAP rightly focuses on training and systems which are "completed", but the effectiveness of these actions should be triangulated over time in a range of ways to evidence a culture of safeguarding. The safeguarding section of the PIAP could be strengthened by widening its actions and its evidence base through eliciting feedback from students, staff and stakeholders. In the same way, the PIAP presents a set of improvements in community learning as "completed", when the actions identified are only the start of the improvement. This section needs to include the ways in which the impact of initial assessment and progression activities will be measured.

The college self-assessment report (SAR) is still in draft form, with a position statement update to reflect work underway following inspection. Leaders should consider completing the SAR and quality improvement plan (QIP) early enough in the college year to enable action to have impact in-year for current students. The SAR is insufficiently robust, with description rather than evaluative data used as evidence for judgements. Leaders could consider identifying and evidencing strengths and weaknesses in order to identify and share good practice and establish clear improvement targets where weaknesses are evident. A robust SAR and improvement plans linked to targets and outcomes will support the work of the new quality group in monitoring progress, addressing areas of weakness and celebrating and evidencing achievements.

# **Recent developments with college financial health and performance**

## **Review of previous financial year outturn (2021/22)**

The college has signed off its 2021/22 financial statements with an unqualified audit opinion and an operating surplus. This represents a rapid turnaround in financial performance – thanks mostly to the college’s success in subletting unused residential accommodation to nurses, expanding summer schools, and hiring facilities to other users in UWL.

## **Review of current year financial performance to date**

The budget for 2022/23 aims to achieve an operating surplus of around 2.8% of turnover. Senior leaders confirm that the current projection is that budget targets for the year as a whole will be achieved.

## **Review of forward years financial performance**

The December 2022 management accounts indicate an improvement in the operating surplus, based on an increase in turnover, achieved through higher commercial income and growth in FE delivery income. Assuming the same treatment of the UWL intercreditor, financial health should remain good under the current methodology.

These projections are indicative at this stage and predate the completion of curriculum planning now underway for 2023/24.

## **Assessment of cash / liquidity position**

Cash balances at 31 July 2022 were healthy, and working capital remains strong in the year ahead.

## **Review of recent development with estates and capital plans**

Since its acquisition by UWL, the college has made visible improvements to accommodation at its main campus in Headington. These improvements have helped to create a positive first impression of a campus that is well cared for and maintained to a good standard. Catering facilities for students are limited pending a much needed increase in the number of students on campus. Annual capital investment broadly matches the annual charges for depreciation and appears affordable.



The college is taking steps to revive previous planning consent for a new accommodation block to cater for future growth in HE student numbers, but this remains a medium rather than short-term proposition.

Neither the college nor UWL have any plans for asset disposals, though the long-term future of Ruskin presents a potential opportunity.

## **Appendix A – Interviewees**

Ruskin College chair

Principal

Vice principal

Director of student services (UWL) (designated safeguarding lead)

Director of HR (UWL)

Academic registrar and director of academic quality and standards (UWL)

Interim campus services manager (deputy designated safeguarding lead)

Group of staff

Group of students

## **Appendix B – Documents reviewed**

Agenda and Minutes of Further Education Board Meeting (November 2022)

Articles of Association

Organisational Chart

Summary of Learners, Enrolments and Outcomes

Self -Assessment Report 2021/22: Position Statement

Post-Inspection Action Plan

Safeguarding Policy and Process

Draft Terms of Reference for Ruskin College Quality Group

Learner Satisfaction Results December 2022

Financial Statements 2021/22

Finance Record 2021/22

External Audit Management Report 2021/22

College Financial Forecasting Return July 2022

December 2022 Management Accounts and Cashflow Forecast

Whole College Risk Register