

Inspection of Digital Advantage

Inspection dates: 29 April to 1 May 2025

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

Digital Advantage is a charity established in 2020. It helps young people with special educational needs and disabilities to gain creative, digital and life skills that will help them to secure paid employment in the digital economy. In 2022, Digital Advantage established Digital Independent Specialist College (DISC), through which it provides formalised education and training programmes.

DISC is based in central Manchester. It provides training for young people aged 16 to 24 years of age who have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. Most learners' primary diagnosis is autism spectrum condition. At the time of the inspection, there were 43 learners attending the college across four different pathways. Learners attend the pathway most suited to their needs and their distance from the job market. Foundation 1 and 2 pathways focus mostly on helping learners to recover from past experiences and to grow in confidence. The gateway pathway prepares learners for employment and adulthood. The supported internship programme helps them to focus on their chosen career and to become independent.

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

Staff have established a welcoming, calm and highly inclusive learning environment that replicates the demands of a digital workplace. Learners have highly positive and professional working relationships with staff. There is a strong culture of mutual respect. Staff model professional standards and inclusive practices in their interaction with learners and behave as they would at work. Learners model these positive behaviours extremely well with everyone they meet.

Staff empathise very well with their learners. They understand the workplace challenges that learners may face and how to support them. Staff teach learners how to dress suitably for an interview and how to make and receive compliments in the workplace that avoid awkward situations.

Learners feel very happy and safe at the college. They are enthusiastic, committed to their studies and highly motivated to succeed. Learners appreciate the belief staff have in them and their encouragement for them to go 'beyond their limit'.

Learners develop significant confidence, resilience and problem-solving skills. They learn to overcome their fears and increase their self-esteem. Learners begin to share their new digital skills openly with their peers, staff and employers because staff celebrate their achievements and help them to recognise their considerable talent.

Staff support learners to experience new environments and activities that provide them with enhanced opportunities for career development and personal well-being. Learners benefit from independent travel training and a range of enrichment activities. These include chess, cooking and boxing as well as café visits, where they can practise and develop their communication skills in safe spaces.

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

Leaders have established ambitious, individualised curriculums to meet the specific needs and interests of learners with neurodiversity and significant barriers to learning. The curriculums equip learners with the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to work successfully within the digital industry and to become active citizens within their local communities.

Leaders and managers have formed highly effective partnerships with employers and a local design agency. Consequently, learners benefit from working on real industry projects and develop the skills that they need to be successful in their chosen digital specialism. Learners enjoy high-quality, relevant work placements that provide opportunities for them to access a range of job opportunities.

Staff have a detailed understanding of learners' individual needs, abilities and aspirations. They skilfully link the requirements of project briefs to learners' EHC plan outcomes to ensure that learners achieve their personal aspirations and individual learning goals. Staff work closely with parents and carers to understand

learners' readiness for employment and the wider support that they will need to achieve their goals. Leaders devise learning activities that involve collaboration with peers, develop communication skills and help learners to overcome their social anxiety and introversion.

Staff teach the curriculum in a sensible order. They determine what each learner tackles first on their project briefs and the new knowledge and skills that they need to learn to complete them to clients' requirements. Staff use questioning techniques effectively to check learners' understanding and to help them to adapt their ideas and designs over time.

Tutors and industry experts provide learners with detailed and carefully crafted developmental feedback. Learners understand fully how to improve their work without feeling criticised or disheartened and practise their skills repeatedly until they have mastered them. They make good and often substantial progress as a result of this feedback.

Learners benefit from industry standard digital equipment, software and resources. They frequently access a working digital media studio and podcast suite as part of their learning that emulate what they will find in industry.

Learners receive effective support from highly accomplished industry experts, who are qualified in pastoral care, behavioural support and psychology. They help learners to overcome the traumatic experiences that they experienced at school and remove their barriers to learning.

The quality of learners' work is high. It meets employers' high expectations and industry requirements. For example, supported interns were commissioned to create a professional video to help learners at a special school to develop signing skills relating to respect and equality. Learners use technical language fluently and confidently. They can articulate key concepts to their peers and staff using correct industry terminology. Learners often produce work that is used by the college in their promotions, such as a 'zine' for the forthcoming open evening.

Most learners progress on to positive destinations. Learners who previously attended the supported internship programme sustain their employment over time. However, learners' destinations are not always aligned to the intent of a supported internship. On a very few occasions, learners leave the college and are not in education, employment or training.

Learners apply their English and mathematical skills effectively in their projects. They create blogs, present updates to clients on the progress of their work and use mathematics to design concepts and drawings. However, on a few occasions, tutors do not correct spelling and grammatical errors in learners' draft work. Consequently, learners continue to make the same mistakes, which could impact on their professional work in the future.

Learners receive high-quality, industry-specific careers education, information, advice and guidance. Staff use their high levels of expertise within the digital industry to provide learners with comprehensive insights into career pathways. Learners also benefit from employers' knowledge and their industry requirements to make informed decisions about their next steps.

Leaders and managers have recently implemented an effective quality assurance and improvement cycle. This has helped them to identify improvements to their curriculum to better meet the needs of a minority of learners, who require more time to become employment ready. As a result, they created the gateway pathway. However, leaders recognise that it is too early to judge the impact of the changes to the curriculum on learners' success.

Leaders have established a local governing body to oversee the performance of the college. They have made changes to the governance structure to provide clarity between the college, the charity and the charity's board of trustees. Governors now receive appropriate reports that help them to challenge leaders about the impact of the actions they take to improve the quality of education at the college. However, governors need more time to fully establish the new structure to be fully effective.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Ensure that the new gateway curriculum meets the needs and future aspirations of learners.
- Ensure that learners continue to develop their English and mathematical skills to a high standard across the different curriculums.
- Establish the new governance structure fully.

Provider details

Unique reference number	149248
Address	Holyoake House Hanover Street Manchester M4 4AH
Contact number	0161 410 2040
Website	https://disc.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Caroline Dean
Provider type	Independent specialist college
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the head of college, 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

Suzanne Wainwright, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Lisa Duncalf	Ofsted Inspector
Julie Gibson	Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
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M1 2WD

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