

Assessment Report

SWRAC

ASSESSMENT INFORMATION	
Assessment Type	Accreditation Review
Assessor's Decision	Standard Met
Assessor's Name	Janet Lewis-Jones
Evidence Gathering/Assessment Date/s	9 th & 10 th June 2025
Client ID and Assessment Reference	C10301 - PN202878
Accreditation Review to be conducted by	14 th June 2028

METHODOLOGY	
Evidence gathering	Interviews with staff (Director of Education, Careers Lead/CEIAG Coordinator, 2 x CEIAG Coordinators, 2 x Engagement Coordinators, Engagement and Employer Engagement Coordinator, Employer Engagement Coordinator, 2 x Centre Managers, 2 x Tutors, LSA, Job Coach). Interviews with students and interviews with parents/guardians. Interviews with partners. Review of documentation.
Staff interviews	14
Recipient interviews	8 students; 2 parents/guardians
Partner interviews	3
Document review	Strategy, SAR 2023/24, QIP 2024/25, KPIs & performance data, Prospectus, IAG Statement of Service, CEIAG Policy, IAG website page, Careers Education Plan, Careers Portfolio, selection of case studies, examples of careers session records, example ILP, Careers Support Guide, recent newsletters, recruitment literature, literature aimed at employers, learner and parent feedback.

About the organisation

SWRAC (South West Regional Assessment Centre), formed in 1996, is a Registered Learning Provider, head officed in Dorset. SWRAC has held **matrix** accreditation continuously since 2013, this being the organisation's fifth assessment against the Standard.

SWRAC has grown significantly since the last assessment. In 2022 there were just three delivery sites, all in Dorset. The College had been delivering a construction skills-based provision in Liverpool, but this was ending at the time of the last assessment. SWRAC now has six centres, the three in Dorset, plus three further sites in Merseyside, one having just opened the week before this assessment. Learner numbers have increased from 130 at the time of the last assessment to around 250; the number of staff has grown from 75 to around 115.

SWRAC offers a range of education programmes for young adults with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) - Prepare for Life, Prepare for Work, Supported Internships (including Project Search); alternative education programmes for disengaged young people - Routes to Employment, and mentoring for up to twelve weeks; and programmes for adults - a combination of adult social care/activity centre/life skills learning – THRIVE, and the Vocational Study Programme for young adults beyond school leaving age. The most recent SAR notes 'The type of learners referred to SWRAC is varied although the common factor is that they generally are socially disadvantaged to some degree.... generally have learning and/or behavioural difficulties... individual needs vary and the challenges they bring can be considerable'. Most young people have EHCPs in place, and IAG delivery staff attend reviews.

SWRAC's vision is 'to recognise potential in everyone and contribute positively to their success' and its stated intentions are 'to provide everyone with the skills, knowledge and experiences to... Be independent & resilient, Grow into education, employment or meaningful activity, Live healthily & sustainably, Develop and maintain healthy relationships, Grow socially and contribute positively to communities & local economies, Be safe'.

A small number of suggestions for development and improvement were made at the last assessment and these have been progressed. One related to improving data analysis in order to better evaluate the impact of IAG provision; since the last assessment a new data management system has been purchased and rolled out and staff interviewed described the considerable benefits this has brought; the next step will be to use the data collated to consider impact. The other was around analysing feedback from learners – feedback collection from learners remains strong through the Student Council, and responding to feedback is also apparent, analysis for patterns and trends might still be useful.

The Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

IAG provision begins with the ‘promotional’ activity undertaken with referrers, partners, and potential students and their families/guardians. This is focussed on ensuring that there is a clear understanding of SWRAC’s offer and whether that will be a “good fit” for the prospective student in terms of aspirations and abilities/potential. This work is predominantly carried out by SWRAC’s three Engagement Coordinators, supported with a range of written materials and the website for further reference. IAG might be provided at events, or by telephone or face to face “consult” and usually includes an opportunity to tour the relevant Centre to experience what being a student there will be like. Staff noted, “It is essential that they [prospective students and their parents/guardians], have all of the information they need to make an informed choice. If that involves several visits for them to be sure, that’s fine”; and “My goal is to make sure that every question they have is answered and they have a chance to talk about anything they are worried or concerned about”. They also noted, “I make sure they understand that it will be up to the Council whether or not funding gets approved though”.

Once enrolled, students have support from a wide range of staff – Tutors, Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), Centre Managers, where relevant Job Coaches, mentors and CEIAG Coordinators. As part of SWRAC’s ethos, students are encouraged to speak to whichever staff member they feel comfortable talking to, and therefore all staff are involved in some level of IAG provision, as one described, “The way we do it is that they start having conversations with whoever they feel comfortable with, and then we gradually bring in the ‘right’ person as needed. So if it is something careers based, we’ll involve the careers person for example. Overall I think that means they are more likely to get the support and information they need”. Centre Managers described how they might get involved if there were any issues – “I might do a home visit if they are disengaging... agree a manageable action plan, so providing some IAG around that”; “If there are issues in the classroom, I might do a support plan with them, officially its supposed to be a ‘behavioural support plan’ but that implies intentionally bad behaviour, which it often isn’t, so I prefer ‘support plan’, with IAG supporting that”.

Staff spoke about how all interactions are recorded on Databridge¹ – “It’s been brilliant... we record everything so that we can capture what’s happening with each student and make sure we’re all aware so that the IAG we provide is consistent and complementary”.

SWRAC describes its CEIAG offer – ‘Our programmes are based around the Preparing for Adulthood aims. Information, advice and guidance is embedded in all curriculums as well as each centre having its own CEIAG advisor to support learners with one to one appointments, careers workshops, work tasters, work experience, employer visits, as well as searching for work or further educational opportunities,

¹ Databridge is a management information system (MIS) that supports specialist education providers with features such as RARPA, Evidencing, Event Log, Assessments, Timetabling, Care, ILR Manager etc

applying and taking part in interviews'. The College is developing this further with a weekly timetabled Careers & Enterprise lesson from September. SWRAC operates a four quarter (rather than three term) year, and has intakes at the start of each quarter; the new programme will be non-sequential so that it flows for each intake and they cover all elements by the end of one year.

Since the last assessment, a career journey workbook was developed, following some external observations of practice undertaken by the previous Careers Lead. In the last year this has been developed further into the Careers Portfolio, a document that stays with the student throughout their time with SWRAC, which is often three years, which tracks their changing aspirations and activities related to pursuing their future plans. This is an attractive and engaging document which both staff and students referred to during interviews, as capturing their career related activities. Completion of the portfolio is supported with IAG provided by staff. Students are also given CareerPilot, JED and Planit Plus accounts in order to research job options, including undertaking the 'Job of the Day' projects.

Some students benefit from being mentored – “This is especially the case with students who struggle to engage... they might have six or more one to ones just to get them to a place where they are comfortable to come in, and join in. There is IAG there around coping strategies for example”; “One learner could get as far as Lidl's [opposite the Centre] in the taxi, but at first wouldn't get out of the taxi, then would, but wouldn't move away from Lidl's. I would go and chat to him over there, then one day, he felt ready”.

IAG is also provided by Employer Engagement staff to both employers and students who may be going to them on placement (the latter delivered in conjunction with the CEIAG Coordinators). They described how employers can be nervous about taking students with additional needs. SWRAC has produced literature to “dispel myths” around this, and staff described how if employers still felt nervous, they would connect them with an experienced placement host – in particular, one who is a real champion of work experience and supported internships for learners with additional needs. The same employer, who was interviewed, described how he is hosting an event for employers around supported internships and the benefits they bring.

Specifically in relation to supported internships, SWRAC Job Coaches provide IAG to interns to help them get the most from the experience and capture their learning. They also support them with exploring their next steps, again in conjunction with the CEIAG team.

SWRAC has recently established a Job Club as a pilot at one of its Centres for current and past students to come in and access resources as well as IAG once a week.

All of the above approaches to IAG delivery are supported by SWRAC's IAG Statement of Service and CEIAG Policy. The particularly good Statement of Service opens with 'South West Regional Assessment Centre (SWRAC) aim to provide

impartial, accessible careers education, advice and guidance services to support students, parent/carers, former students/clients, stakeholders and employers’.

The difference the IAG makes to recipients and the overall impact

Staff gave various examples of the significant difference IAG provision has made for individual students. This was also evident within the case studies supplied and features within other literature. These commonly describe students who at the outset are shy, anxious, non-communicative, low energy and unambitious, who “transform” into confident, enthusiastic, more independent, happy young adults. Students interviewed gave similar accounts of how the support and guidance received from SWRAC had changed them – “I would say it has completely changed my life. I don’t think I would be doing what I am doing now without SWRAC”. Parents/guardians also described the impact SWRAC has had – “The difference in [young person] is like night and day... before she was very quiet, didn’t want to do anything, all a bit hopeless. Now she comes back buzzing. She talks about the future, her future, she’s never done that before. She’s ready and waiting on the stairs to get picked up every day!” and “To be honest, everywhere else has been useless. The last place, he just didn’t make any effort, and they let him get away with that. He’d just sit in his room. Here, they have set some boundaries and some goals. Now he wants to go in, he’s got some ambition now”.

Staff described how parents and guardians are often “Defeated. Worn down. Without any hope of things being any different. I love that when they go away from here [after an initial consult] they are smiling”; “I tell them, we’re in it together”; “I’m often amazed at how little information and advice they’ve had”. Feedback after initial IAG sessions collected by Engagement staff via email includes – ‘You helped us so much with information and pointing us in the right direction to help XXX in the next stage of his life. We appreciate the time you spent chatting with us’ and ‘Thank you again. We were so worried about him and what to do next but you have helped calm us and realise there is lots of help and support out there’.

The Strategy includes a definition of how SWRAC will gauge success, including the success of its IAG provision – “Recognising the business benefits of providing timely and high-quality support and information to learners e.g. Retention of learners to completion, Motivation of learners, Re-assurance of learners, Satisfied clients as a result of high completion rates’. The latest SAR notes how destination and progression monitoring has been increased from 12 months to 3 years in order to reflect on longer term impact. Key performance indicator (KPI) reporting compares data from the previous two years to the current year and RAG rates areas where this has negatively deviated. Overall attendance has improved year on year, achievement of qualifications has declined somewhat and currently sits under the KPI target, retention is fairly consistent, sitting in the upper eighties [percentage] against a national average of low nineties. Destination data shows that whilst employment outcomes have increased from 13% to 20%, NEET and education outcomes have gone down. Last year, overall SWRAC achieved 76% positive

outcomes against a target of 80%, partial year to date, this is sitting at 55%. Staff felt that current performance patterns were reflective of the fact that there has been a marked increase in the number of young people with social, emotional and mental health needs (SCMH) such as extreme anxiety, and the ongoing fallout from the global pandemic.

Feedback is another way that SWRAC considers the impact of IAG delivery. This is collected through the Student Council (Councillors from each class gather to meet with the Managing Director on a termly basis) and through survey. The most recent survey student survey results reviewed include: 94% feel that they will be more independent; 93% that they will be able to maintain positive mental wellbeing; and 94% that SWRAC will help them move into education, training, volunteering or employment; 78% know how to access careers IAG and 80% feel they have learnt about future job and education opportunities. Parents/guardians responding to their survey report that 100% of their young people are happy at SWRAC; 95% that SWRAC is successfully meeting 'the Preparing for Adulthood (PFA) aims of Good Health, Independent Living, Friends & Relationships and Community & Employment'; and 82% feel that SWRAC's 'Careers programme supports my young person to develop essential skills'. Ninety percent of parents would recommend SWRAC, with the other 10% answering 'maybe, depending on circumstance'.

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.

- The availability of and access to IAG is a real area of strength. This is evident in a number of ways. The culture of students being able to have conversations with whichever staff member(s) they feel most comfortable talking to contributes to them being more likely to have those conversations. Staff can then 'gently introduce' them to more specialist input such as formal careers guidance. Careers IAG is embedded in provision, and becoming even more so. Staff noted that students have "lots of time with" the CEIAG team, and that the team "make careers fun... when people think of careers they think of a very formal one to one, which can be a bit daunting or off putting. I think, here its much more engaging. The trick is to get them excited about the careers work". The new Careers Portfolio further supports engagement, as well as capturing actions resulting from IAG provided, and maintaining a record of distance travelled. The introduction of Databridge, further supports delivery by recording all interventions promoting consistency and a unified approach to IAG provision – "I think one of SWRAC's strengths is how we all work as a team in the interest of each young person. Definitely no siloing". Staff commented on having "the luxury to be less concerned about qualification achievements and more focused on the student's future, making a real and sustainable impact on that"; "We're about outcomes" (3.1, 3.2, 4.1)

- Students are supported to engage at their own pace in order to make best use of the IAG available. There are a number of facets to this. The work of LSAs in supporting students to take forward activities within their ILPs, Career Portfolios and career session tasks. The provision of one to one mentoring for students who need extra initial support to develop the confidence to take part and to access provision. Partnerships with parents from the outset so that they can play their part in supporting young people to get the most from the provision. This approach ensures that students are able to participate and benefit from what SWRAC has to offer (4.3)
- SWRAC have created a safe and enabling environment in which students can thrive. This includes some stretch and challenge, but within a setting where students feel encouraged and empowered. A number of interviewees compared their experience to other previous experiences they had had, where they/their young person did not feel well supported or safe, and how this had led to them withdrawing both emotionally and actually. They described SWRAC by contrast as being “Really nice place, nice people, always help you”; “Make you feel OK”; “Treat you like an adult, but show they care at the same time”; “Are interested in you”; “They even do this mindfulness thing, what’s it called... Wellbeing, every week. Helps you think straight” (1.3, 1.4)
- SWRAC have created and supported the development of a range of opportunities for their students. An early adopter of Supported Internships, these are now flourishing and growing; strong, long-standing relationships with employers and local organisations, have really opened up access to a broad range of experiences for students. Employer Engagement staff endeavour to source opportunities that are both relevant to students interests and also accessible in terms of transport/location. Student enterprise is also being developed – “The world is changing, you can earn a living through selling things online for example. That might be perfect for some of our learners”; “They are already manufacturing bird boxes, which we will be selling through the RSPB, and bottle openers, where we have a stand in a local outlet... I envisage a retail outlet attached to every Centre selling student made merchandise,” said staff. This diversity of opportunity contributes to students having more ambition and higher aspirations than might otherwise be the case, with making the most of these opportunities supported by comprehensive IAG for both students and partners (2.7, 4.7)
- SWRAC sets itself high standards. This includes requiring CEIAG staff to hold at least level 6 qualifications, providing full support to acquire these where necessary. They have also worked since the last assessment to map provision against the Gatsby benchmarks with a partner from the local Careers Hub noting – “They are at one hundred percent across the eight benchmarks. The next step for them would be to adopt the Careers Impact System, I will be suggesting this to them”. And of course continued engagement with the **matrix** Standard (1.1)

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.

- Now that Databridge has been fully rolled out it will be much easier to take forward previous suggestions around more empirically evaluating the impact of IAG provision. The Strategy and IAG Statement of Service already to some extent describe the intended impact of IAG provision, but this might be made more explicit through reframing the Statement of Service as a statement of intent, detailing the intent behind each 'type' of IAG provided. For example, defining the intent of engagement IAG might be about ensuring students/carers make an informed choice based on accurate information about the provision – this might then be quantitatively explored through retention data and through feedback specifically asking if their experience of SWRAC was what they had been advised it would be. Or, in relation to next steps IAG, the intent would be related to those steps being what the student wanted them to be and was appropriate to their circumstances; this might be explored through analysing if students progress to their first or second choice next step (the step that the IAG they have received was related to), and if they sustain destinations. This approach would enable SWRAC to develop a deep understanding of the role and impact of IAG within the wider provision (6.1, 6.2)
- The provision in Merseyside has grown rapidly over the last two years. Currently there is only one member of staff undertaking the Engagement and Employer Engagement role (albeit with administrative support). There is also only one CEIAG Coordinator. As learner numbers grow so that they are equivalent to those in Dorset (something that looks set to happen very soon), it will be important to ensure that the resourcing and therefore capacity is commensurate across the two regions (2.6)
- In order to maintain consistency across the two regions, SWRAC has begun to introduce peer meetings, e.g. CEIAG Coordinators' meetings, Engagement Coordinators' meetings ... these are still establishing following recent staff changes/appointments. It will be important to ensure that these do become embedded in order to ensure that there are opportunities for sharing ideas and approaches, as well as peer support (2.5, 2.8)

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3. Complete annual continuous improvement checks in a timely way, it is expected these will be carried out annually by the accreditation anniversary date.
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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.
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