

Ofsted's accreditation visit to Minerva's Virtual Academy

On 26 and 27 June 2024, Ofsted visited Minerva's Virtual Academy as part of the [Online Education Accreditation Scheme](#). Through this scheme, providers of full-time online education to school-age children in England can apply to the Department for Education (DfE) for accreditation.

Ofsted visits providers to find out whether they meet the minimum standards for online education set by the DfE. This report sets out what we found during our visit on 26 and 27 June 2024. You can find out whether this provider is accredited by the DfE at [Get Information about Schools](#).

Key findings

- **Minerva's Virtual Academy meets all the minimum standards** for online education.
- At Minerva's Virtual Academy, well-being is at the heart of everything. Parents, pupils and staff feel valued, cared for and supported. The headteacher leads by example and ensures that caring relationships underpin pupils' academic and pastoral development.
- All members of staff – whether teachers, mentors or a member of the administrative team – exemplify the proprietor's ambition to provide a high-quality curriculum to happy, successful children. Leaders have achieved their aim of replicating the best aspects of a traditional, physical school in an online environment.
- Minerva's Virtual Academy's mentoring programme is the backbone on which its success is built. On joining the provider, pupils are assigned a one-to-one mentor who has been matched with them based on their needs and interests. Mentors are highly skilled and provide pupils and their families with the individualised support they require.
- Leaders, teachers and mentors know pupils extremely well. They expertly entwine teaching and mentoring to ensure that all pupils flourish. Teachers adapt planning so that learning activities provide pupils, including pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, with appropriate levels of support and challenge.
- As a result of the growth in pupil numbers, it has been necessary for leaders to appoint additional staff, including middle leaders. This has, understandably, led

to some minor differences in teaching and learning practices. The headteacher has recognised this and has already put appropriate systems in place to improve consistency across year groups and subjects.

Who is this online provider?

- Minerva's Virtual Academy is an online provider catering for pupils between the ages of 11 and 18 years. Since its inception in 2020, it has grown rapidly and now has nearly 800 pupils on roll. Of these, approximately half have a diagnosed special educational need. The majority of pupils are registered as being electively home educated and are placed at Minerva's Virtual Academy by their parents. A small number of pupils have been placed by a local authority or registered school.
- Pupils attend Minerva's Virtual Academy for a wide variety of reasons. For example, some find it difficult to attend a physical school due to their complex social, emotional and mental health needs, while other pupils are elite athletes who rely on the flexibility afforded to them by an online school to fulfil their training and competition schedules.
- Minerva's Virtual Academy offers a broad academic curriculum. It is organised into four phases: Middle School (Years 7 and 8), Year 9, Senior School (Years 10 and 11) and Sixth Form (Years 12 and 13). Older pupils study for external examinations. Year 11 pupils take IGCSEs and Year 13 students take International A levels and/or an Esports BTEC qualification.
- Minerva's Virtual Academy's provision is underpinned by 'four pillars'. These are: a virtual learning platform, live lessons, mentoring and community. As part of this offer, all pupils receive weekly one-to-one mentoring sessions and, through the virtual learning platform, can communicate with their mentors at any time. Community plays a key role at Minerva's Virtual Academy. Pupils attend weekly assemblies and can participate in a wide range of after-school clubs. Additionally, leaders organise regular trips where pupils can meet up with each other and their teachers/mentors. Recent trips have included visits to Hampton Court Palace and the Roman Baths.
- Alongside the taught curriculum, pupils participate in an extensive well-being programme. Designed to support pupils' personal and academic growth, well-being sessions help pupils manage their own health, relationships, emotional intelligence and communication skills. Older pupils receive impartial careers advice from a range of providers, for example through external speakers and access to events such as careers fairs and university open days.
- Currently, 747 school-age pupils study with Minerva's Virtual Academy full time. Of these, 39 have an [education, health and care \(EHC\) plan](#). Five hundred and forty-nine school-age pupils live in England. No school-age pupils study with Minerva's Virtual Academy part time.

- At the time of this accreditation visit, there were no looked after children on the roll of Minerva's Virtual Academy.
- There are currently 55 post-16 learners studying with Minerva's Virtual Academy. Of these, none have an EHC plan.

How are pupils taught at Minerva's Virtual Academy?

- The curriculum at Minerva's Virtual Academy is delivered through a 'flipped learning' model. This involves pupils undertaking interactive self-study on the virtual learning platform before attending live lessons. Pupils are able to respond either verbally or via a chat facility. All lessons are recorded. This enables pupils to rewatch lessons or catch up on any missed sessions, for example for elite athletes participating in sporting activities.
- Teachers plan well-structured sequences of lessons using their secure subject knowledge. Due to the addition of new teaching staff, including middle leaders, there are some small discrepancies in how learning is sequenced across different subjects and year groups. The headteacher has been proactive in addressing this.
- Teaching builds on pupils' prior knowledge, and teachers routinely explain how learning will contribute to pupils' overall understanding of a concept. Teachers make lessons interesting and use questions to challenge and check pupils' progress. Teachers make effective use of high-quality resources and interweave different subjects to bring learning to life. For example, a history lesson on the Second World War in a computing lesson on encryption used the example of shift-key encryption at Bletchley Park.
- Teachers have an in-depth understanding of the electronic platforms they use in the delivery of teaching. They use this and their calm manner to manage behaviour well. During lessons, teachers have their cameras on, and pupils are expected to do the same. Where pupils are reluctant to do this, for example due to anxiety, teachers and mentors support pupils to build their confidence and encourage them to make use of the learning platform's chat facilities.

What are Minerva's Virtual Academy's arrangements like for keeping children safe?

- **Ofsted's visits to online providers can give only a limited level of assurance on the effectiveness of safeguarding, compared to our inspections of schools and other providers of face-to-face education and training.** However, we found that the arrangements for keeping children safe at Minerva's Virtual Academy are appropriate.
- At Minerva's Virtual Academy, keeping children safe is everyone's responsibility. The headteacher and designated safeguarding lead display a tenacious approach to safeguarding and child protection. All members of staff understand their

responsibilities, as well as the signs they should look out for, given the provider's context and the needs of the pupils for which it caters.

- Leaders have put a detailed policy in place. It pays due regard to the statutory guidance for registered schools issued by the Secretary of State and takes into account both the international and online nature of the provision. Leaders and staff demonstrate a secure understanding of reporting and referring procedures, ensuring that all concerns are dealt with appropriately and effectively.
- The provider's safeguarding and child protection procedures are strengthened by the effective implementation of other policies, including those for online safety, safer recruitment and whistleblowing.
- Recruitment processes at Minerva's Virtual Academy are extensive and extremely thorough. Leaders carry out appropriate suitability checks for staff before they commence employment. This ensures that staff are not only safe to work with children but will be ambassadors in supporting the provider's ethos. Minerva's Virtual Academy does not use supply staff.
- Leaders use monitoring and filtering systems effectively to provide an online environment in which pupils can learn safely. Staff and pupils use their own devices to access the provider's learning platform. However, leaders have carefully considered the specific risks that arise from this and have taken appropriate steps to mitigate these.

What do pupils and parents and carers think about Minerva's Virtual Academy?

- Pupils talk extremely positively about Minerva's Virtual Academy. They feel happy, safe and cared for. They appreciate the support that staff provide both in their studies and their wider pastoral development. Many pupils told inspectors that attending Minerva's Virtual Academy had helped to improve their mental health.
- Pupils feel that behaviour in lessons is strong and are confident that, on the few occasions where misbehaviour does occur, teachers are quick to respond. Pupils see social rooms and study support groups as a real positive in establishing peer relationships, along with the meet-up days, which pupils say they enjoy attending.
- Parents have high regard for Minerva's Virtual Academy, particularly the flexibility, engagement and empathy shown by staff in getting to know their children's individual needs. Parents who spoke with inspectors felt that Minerva's Virtual Academy had enabled their child to re-engage successfully with education. One parent, summing up the views of many, stated that Minerva's Virtual Academy had 'given their child their future back'.

About the visit

- This is Minerva's Virtual Academy's first accreditation visit. Jonathan Dyer, His Majesty's Inspector (HMI) was the lead inspector, accompanied by John Lambern HMI and John Nixon HMI.

Compliance with the Department for Education's standards for online education

This section reports on how well Minerva's Virtual Academy meets the standards for online education.

Minerva's Virtual Academy meets all of the applicable standards for online education set out by the DfE ('the standards'). The standards that are not applicable to Minerva's Virtual Academy are listed below.

The full list of standards can be found in [DfE's guidance on meeting the online education standards](#).

Standards that do not apply to this provider

The following standards do not apply to this provider:

- **Standards 5.11, 5.12, 5.13, 5.14, 5.16, 5.17, 5.18** only apply where the provider uses supply staff.
- **Standard 5.22** only applies if a proprietor lives or has lived outside of the UK.
- **Standard 6.3** only applies where a provider has a governing body.
- **Standards 6.5, 6.10** only apply where a report on the provider has been published under the Online Education Accreditation Scheme at the time of the visit.

Contact details for Minerva's Virtual Academy

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