Waltham Forest College

Focused monitoring visit report

Unique reference number:	130456
Name of lead inspector:	Philippa Francis HMI
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Address:	Forest Road Walthamstow London E17 4JB
Telephone number:	0208 5018000

Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Waltham Forest College is a large college located within the London Borough of Waltham Forest. Courses are offered in 11 of 15 sector subject areas. The largest number of learners studies on courses in the subject area of preparing for life and work. Courses are offered at all levels of study including higher education. The highest number of enrolments is at foundation level. The college's small apprenticeship provision is increasing with new apprenticeships in rail engineering and butchery.

Some 5,558 learners attend the college. Of 1,564 learners aged 16 to 18, 79% study full time. Of 3,994 adult learners, 84% study part time. Approximately 62% of learners are of minority ethnic heritage, compared to 45% within the population of Waltham Forest.

The college was last inspected in June 2010. At that inspection, its overall effectiveness and capacity to improve were judged as satisfactory, as were the three aspects of outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management. Of four sector subject areas inspected, two were judged as good and two as satisfactory. The monitoring visit focused on the progress that has been made in the areas identified as in need of improvement.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has been made in improving the self-assessment process and driving forward improvements at a faster rate? To what extent are improvement targets set and monitored regularly?   **Reasonable progress**

Managers have strengthened self-assessment and quality assurance systems since the last inspection and are implementing the revised systems with increased momentum. Self-assessment processes are effective in identifying the key areas requiring improvement and developing appropriate actions to bring improvements about. The 2010/11 summary self-assessment report, however, is often more descriptive than evaluative. The rate of improvement actions coming to fruition has quickened considerably in the current year.

Curriculum teams are now much more closely involved with the self-assessment process and consequently have a better understanding of performance data and the use of targets to drive improvement. This has increased managers' and teachers' accountability for the performance of learners and enabled them to monitor key indicators such as attendance and retention frequently and more effectively. As well as termly performance reviews at curriculum area level, the heads of school review performance data against targets in the recently introduced monthly meetings. This

is providing a sharper focus on meeting key performance indicators and enables managers to identify potential areas of concern more quickly.

Success rate targets set at course level are more demanding than those at whole college level. The two sets of targets do not correlate closely. Managers acknowledge the need to strengthen the link between target setting at course, school and whole college levels to ensure that all targets are sufficiently challenging to secure rapid improvement in learners' outcomes.

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has been made in increasing success rates in both learner and employer responsive provision, particularly for younger learners?   **Insufficient progress**

Since the last inspection, long course success rates overall have declined and are well below average. Success rates for younger learners increased over this period, recovering well from a significant downturn in 2009/10. In particular, retention rates increased because of much closer attention to supporting learners to complete their courses in 2010/11. However, rates for adults have declined markedly from the broadly average position at inspection. In particular, while retention rates have increased for this age group, pass rates have declined markedly. Managers have identified two areas of underperformance that contributed significantly to the decline and taken appropriate action to improve provision or revise the curriculum.

Success rates for the high number of enrolments on short courses have remained similar since the inspection and are just above average. Success rates for key and functional skills qualifications have remained broadly similar over the period since the inspection and in 2010/11 are in line with the low national rate. Success rates for employment-based learners on National Vocational Qualifications and other qualifications increased to high in 2010/11, but success rates on the small number of apprenticeships are very low.

College data show that in-year retention rates are similar to the same point in the previous year. However, because of additional and close monitoring of learners' progress, managers do not anticipate the high volume of withdrawals that have occurred in previous years in the period up to the end of the academic year. Too little evaluation of learners' progress, relative to their starting points, takes place. No firm conclusions can be drawn about the rate of learners' progress overall.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made in setting and agreeing specific and challenging learning targets for individual learners? Are targets reviewed regularly?   **Reasonable progress**

Learners are familiar with being set targets and view these positively in helping them to make progress in their studies. Teachers and tutors have increased their use of

targets considerably across all provision with increasing effectiveness. All younger learners have individual learning plans which are held electronically allowing easy access by tutors, managers and by learners themselves. Adult learners have helpful targets in learning plans of various types. Personal tutors, subject teachers and learners set mostly helpful targets regularly as part of progress reviews. Targets that promote learners' personal and social development, including their attendance and punctuality, are often more specific and challenging than those that promote academic achievement. In a few cases, recording of the completion of targets is insufficient.

Teachers use initial assessment and prior attainment information well to guide learners. However, this information is not yet recorded effectively in individual learning plans. The link between learners' starting points and the targets set is often not sufficiently strong. Learners make good use of advice from tutors and subject teachers to set themselves challenging target grades to work towards. However, these grades are not formally recorded. Plans are in hand to ensure that this is done in the near future.

**How much progress has been made in increasing learners'   Reasonable
attendance rates and punctuality?   progress**

Managers have substantially revised the policies and procedures on attendance and punctuality over the last year, so that learners have a better understanding of the importance of good attendance and punctuality. Teachers are fully aware of their responsibility to implement procedures consistently and follow up unauthorised absences. Each course team monitors actual attendance against targets for each course unit regularly, so that staff can easily identify patterns of attendance and take prompt actions to tackle issues. Early indications are that this is having a positive impact on increasing attendance rates, which are four percentage points higher at the time of the visit than at a similar time last year. However, attendance rates remain variable between curriculum areas, with low attendance still evident in many functional skills lessons. Managers are monitoring attendance assiduously. They recognise the need to analyse the impact of attendance on learners' achievement more explicitly to help maintain the improvements achieved.

A central administrative team now collates data on lateness to lessons and liaises closely with curriculum teams to ensure that data are recorded accurately on registers and that tutors follow up concerns with individual learners. Since September 2011, when this new system started, the number of 'late slips' issued each month has reduced, but managers note there are still some inconsistencies in the way that staff deal with poor punctuality across curriculum areas.

**To what extent has the role of learning support assistants   Reasonable
been clarified and their involvement in planning and delivery   progress
of lessons been increased to ensure that learners' literacy
and numeracy skills are improved?**

Managers have restructured learning support arrangements since the last inspection. Systems are being strengthened. New guidelines for support staff and teachers now clarify the roles and expectations for different types of learning support staff. Training and guidance to enable curriculum and support staff to work together more effectively have been provided.

Managers observe the work of learning support assistants in lessons. Observers' feedback indicates that the quality and effectiveness of learning support in lessons and support sessions vary. Constructive feedback has been provided on how learning support assistants can improve. Inspectors observed several examples of teachers and learning support assistants working closely to develop learners' literacy and numeracy skills.

Learners interviewed during the visit were very positive about the support provided in lessons and in the skills centre. Success rates for learners in receipt of learning support are higher than learners who do not get this support. Support staff monitor the progress of learners attending literacy and numeracy sessions in the skills centre closely, but the monitoring of in-class support is less effective.

Managers are undertaking a survey of learners' language skills, as a high proportion of learners do not have English as their first language. Managers are developing appropriate plans to provide language support to help learners improve their English and to raise achievement overall, and specifically in functional skills in English.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made in increasing the rigour of the lesson observation process and the effectiveness of staff development to support teachers to improve their practice?   **Reasonable progress**

Managers are placing a high emphasis on improving teaching and learning. Since the inspection, they have increased the rigour of the lesson observation process to ensure that it supports an accurate evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers no longer know which of their lessons will be observed in a week-long observation period. The team of observers has been reduced in size to improve consistency and they work across subject departments increasing their objectivity. Paired observations and moderation of observation records are used effectively to increase the accuracy of judgements. Increased analysis of strengths and areas for improvement in observations takes place. Support for teachers to improve their practice is aided by more definitive action plans following observation, support from experienced teachers and further observations as needed. Line managers work closely with teachers in implementing action plans. However, some action points are complicated and do not match closely to the points identified in observation records.

A high proportion of observed lessons were judged as inadequate in 2010/11; however, targeted support and re-observations have reduced this proportion considerably. The number of lessons judged to be good or better is relatively low.

Observers' judgements mostly proved a reasonable match to inspectors' judgements during lessons observed jointly during the visit. However, observation records show that observers do not always evaluate learning effectively.