

University of Derby: Buxton College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Higher Education institution

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Buxton College is the name used for the school of further education (FE) within the University of Derby. Provision for learners aged 16 to 18 is based predominantly at the University’s Devonshire and Harpur Hill campuses in Buxton. Adult programmes are offered at the Buxton Campus and at the main University campus in Derby. A range of off-site courses is delivered through community centres and there are partnership arrangements for some provision outside of Derbyshire. Programmes are offered in most subject areas but the numbers enrolled in some are very small.

The most recent inspection report was published in January 2009. The college was graded satisfactory for its overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management. Of the five subject areas inspected three were graded satisfactory and two were graded good.

This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, all of which had been identified as areas for improvement at the previous inspection.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in ensuring consistency in quality improvement across the college?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection the college has improved overall success rates to above national averages through more rigorous recruitment processes across the college, withdrawal of some underperforming courses and a reduction in enrolment to additional qualifications.

Following the appointment of a new Head of Further Education late in 2009 a set of further education priorities were agreed that align with the university’s strategic priorities. These increased the focus on quality. The university has approved the restructure of both middle and senior management roles focusing on quality improvement, and alignment by subject sector. Managers now have a very clear view of programmes which are underperforming and are tackling this within the college and through partner providers, although it is too early to see the full impact of recent structural changes. A new Deputy Head of FE, Quality, was appointed in April 2010 to work alongside the Deputy Head of FE, Employer Responsive. Four new heads of division have been appointed recently to manage and ensure consistency across a portfolio of varied subject areas, and each leads on a cross-college area of responsibility. Team working is strengthened by the appointment of curriculum co-ordinators and course leaders. The new structure is supported by regular

management meetings with clear agendas. Internal monitoring has been strengthened at both senior and middle management level.

How effectively has the college improved the rigour of the self-assessment process?

Reasonable progress

Self-assessment is inclusive, involving staff and students; although the involvement of employers is at an early stage of development. Accurate outcome data and qualitative information is used well in self-assessment and regular reports have recently been established to enable closer monitoring of progress. Strengths and areas for improvement are clearly identified through self-assessment. Action plans address issues raised effectively, although measurable targets are not always included. Self-assessment processes and documentation are subject to annual review and although these have been simplified, the final college self-assessment report is still too complex and separates judgements from evidence.

Since the appointment of the new Head of FE, self-assessment is undertaken in accordance with a published quality calendar. All teams present their reports and evidence to a validation panel, senior managers review all grades and rigour is increased through the involvement of external consultants.

The college quality improvement plan (QIP) is a synthesis of actions arising from self-assessment. However some major strategic quality developments, such as the implementation of the new structure, are not articulated within this plan. Additionally a range of action plans are produced but are not cross referenced or included in the QIP, so it is not a comprehensive plan or record of action being taken.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made in improving the outcomes of all learners?

Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection long course success rates overall have risen from around the national average in 2007/08 to above the national average in 2009/10 both for learners aged 16 to 19 and adults. The success rate on short qualifications has fallen to below the national average. There are substantial differences in outcomes across subject areas with some smaller areas being weak. Success rates are high in the largest areas, which are health and social care, hotel and catering, hairdressing and beauty therapy, and foundation learning.

The success rate for all learners on long foundation courses has risen substantially to above the national average. On long intermediate courses the success rate for learners aged 16 to 18 is around the national average but is below for adults. On long advanced-level courses the success rate has risen substantially to above the national average for learners aged 16 to 18 and to the national average for adults. There are no significant differences in outcomes between male and female learners.

Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well. Although there are no significant differences in outcomes between any group of minority ethnic learners the college has plans to raise their achievement further.

Apprenticeship outcomes have been variable over the two years since the previous inspection. Substantial improvements in success rates in 2008/09 were not maintained in 2009/10. Over a three-year period there is a modestly improving trend to just below national average. Outcomes on Train to Gain programmes have improved substantially and are well above the national average.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in improving lesson planning and delivery so that individual learning needs are met?

Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection, managers have emphasised even more strongly the importance of making sure that teaching meets learners' needs fully. Staff development activities have supported teachers to use a wider range of strategies to meet the range of learners' preferred learning styles and abilities. Teachers use a detailed profile of learners in each group, based on prior attainment data and initial assessment information, as part of lesson planning. A strong focus is placed on using this information to meet the needs of lower ability learners but information about middle ability or more able learners is used less effectively. Lesson plans are detailed and help teachers to structure and manage their lessons well. Lesson outcomes are often differentiated by ability but teachers do not consistently make sure that they adapt their teaching strategies sufficiently during lessons according to students' ability. For example, questioning techniques are underdeveloped in the extent to which questions either challenge or build on learners' understanding. Formative assessment is often underdeveloped in checking learning or in reinforcing key learning points. The use of several assessment methods, including peer and self-assessment, is insufficient. Staff development has proved effective in motivating teachers to increase the level of learning and progress in their lessons but the effective use of some basic teaching techniques has not been well reinforced through development activities.

What progress has the college made in raising learners' achievements through target setting with learners?

Reasonable progress

Learners are much more familiar with the use of targets to support their achievement and see the value in their use. Managers have ensured that targets are set more regularly and effectively. This work proved successful and influential in the increased success rates in 2009/10, particularly on access courses. Prior attainment information and predicted grades are being used much more effectively to increase the level of challenge, although managers recognise that further development of this aspect is needed. Staff development activities in 2009/10 included specific training

on target setting. Revised documentation includes prompts for both long and short term targets. Managers have recently undertaken quality assurance of individual learning plans to reduce the inconsistency in approach. Their findings are an accurate evaluation of the quality and identify that several aspects, including the use of specific timescales and checking on completion of targets, remain insufficiently effective. Managers have rightly instigated a further major review to increase the rigour of the process.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in improving the rigour of the lesson observation process? Reasonable progress

Managers have reviewed the lesson observation process to make sure that its coverage of all types of learning activity is comprehensive and that its focus is on evaluating students' learning and progress. Teachers no longer know in advance which of their lessons will be observed as observations can take place at any time over a one-week period notified two weeks in advance, thus increasing the rigour of the process. All observers now undertake lesson observations jointly with other experienced observers to verify their judgements at least annually. Observers are becoming more confident in evaluating learning and their judgements are increasingly accurate as shown through joint observations with inspectors. The profile emerging from observations is more realistic in reflecting the quality of lessons than at the previous inspection. The implementation of termly observation team meetings is proving an effective forum for standardising judgements and reducing the potential for over-grading; although more regular support for observers, particularly those new to the role, is more limited. Data emerging from observations are being used increasingly productively to draw together key themes, although some analysis is insufficiently detailed to provide a clear picture of the quality of teaching and learning. The revised policy documentation, still in draft format, does not specify sufficiently the moderation process or the approach to taking individual teachers' improvement action plans forward.

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