

Doncaster College

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Doncaster College is a large general further education college, with its main site in the centre of the town and a university centre campus six miles away in High Melton. The college offers programmes from entry to post-graduate level across a wide range of subject areas. It is the main provider of post-compulsory education in Doncaster where there are many areas of high deprivation. In the academic year 2009/10 the college enrolled 3,554 16 to 18 year-old learners and 12,374 adult learners, with 437 students aged 14 to 16 on vocational courses. Within work-based learning, Train to Gain and apprenticeship provision were offered across a number of subjects. The college has been going through a period of great change over the last few years and a new principal has been in post for eight months.

The college's last full inspection was in November 2008 when most aspects were judged satisfactory, but achievement and standards were judged inadequate. Of the subject areas inspected, five were judged satisfactory, provision in hairdressing and beauty therapy was judged good, and provision in sport, leisure and tourism was judged inadequate. At the partial reinspection outcomes for learners were judged satisfactory as was provision in sport, leisure and tourism, and reasonable progress was being made in the four additional themes covered. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, including the two mandatory themes of outcomes for learners, and self-assessment and improvement planning.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in ensuring self-assessment and quality-improvement initiatives identify weaknesses and put in place effective actions to address them? **Reasonable progress**

A new system of self-assessment has been introduced this year which is more inclusive of staff at all levels and has involved governors. The new process provides a more rigorous framework to review the quality of the college's provision and is closely aligned to the quality systems. In a few of the subject self-assessment reports the evidence provided does not always fully justify the grade awarded where insufficient weight has been given to the impact on learners and particularly to outcomes. Data are now used well by managers at all levels to inform decisions and monitor progress more frequently.

The college's overall self-assessment report is more focused and identifies the key features against each aspect but it does not provide sufficiently clear evaluation or clearly identify strengths and areas for improvement. The action plans from the self-assessment report need to be clearer about what the staff are going to do to improve the provision and targets need to be more specific and measurable and

have clear accountability. However, actions taken as a result of self-assessment have resulted in overall improvements in success rates. Since September 2010, all underperforming courses have been effectively identified. In some instances curriculum re-organisation has led to courses being removed from the college's offer. Those still being delivered have been placed in special measures and are monitored very closely.

What progress has the college made in using its quality assurance processes to improve the quality of teaching and learning? Reasonable progress

Improvements to the quality of teaching and learning are a high priority at the college and supported well by governors, senior managers and all staff. A revised system of lesson observations has been implemented and all the observers have participated in joint training and moderation to ensure consistency of practice. Inspectors agreed with the college observers on the key features of the four lessons jointly observed as part of the inspection visit. The profile of observation grades has improved slightly and there is now a higher proportion of good and outstanding lessons.

The new documentation is clear and enables college observers to identify strengths and aspects to improve. These have been used more effectively to establish a focused action plan for each teacher and provide good staff development opportunities and support. However, the information from lesson observations is not always used to its full extent in the self-assessment process and the college recognises where these aspects can be integrated. The use of information and learning technology to support learning has increased significantly and there are examples of excellent resources used in lessons and on the college's intranet. The support from advanced teaching practitioners is very good and has helped developments in a number of areas, such as sharing good practice.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving learners' achievement and progress in underperforming areas? Reasonable progress

Learners are now making better progress than previously. Success rates improved for both 16 to 18 year-old learners and adult learners in 2009/10. The overall success rate for adult learners is now around the national average and shows a significant improvement over the last four years. The long courses success rate for 16 to 18 year-old learners shows an improvement of 17 percentage points over the last four years and is now within 5% of the national average.

The college is acutely aware of the need for further increases in success rates and staff are concentrating their attention on the remaining pockets of underperformance. They have developed a wide range of improvement strategies

which already show a positive impact in many subject areas. All staff have a clear focus on improving the experience of the learner and ensuring they all achieve as well as they can. Within work-based learning, Train to Gain success rates have remained high and are well above the national average. In apprenticeship provision there is some underperformance in a number of subjects but intervention strategies are already in place and show some positive impact on current learners.

What progress has been made in ensuring all groups of learners achieve as well as they can and any gaps in achievement are narrowing?

Reasonable progress

Strategies put in place by staff have led to a narrowing of the achievement gap in a number of areas. For example, adult learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and health problems were achieving less well than their peers but their success rate improved markedly in 2009/10 so that they achieved as well as their peers and in line with the national average. There was minimal difference in the long-course success rate for different age groups but the success rate for 16 to 18 year-old learners is lower in comparison with the national average.

The gap between success rates for male and female adult learners was reduced to 1% in 2009/10, with both success rates improving to the national average. For learners aged 16 to 18 the gender gap, which had reduced in 2008/09, increased slightly in 2009/10. The success rates of both groups of learners increased but there was a greater improvement for female learners. For learners from different ethnic groups there were minimal differences in achievement for most groups and the achievement of many groups of learners improved. However, the college is aware of further work needed in this area as not all groups are improving as well as the majority, particularly some groups of adult learners.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving information, advice and guidance so that learners are enrolled on the most appropriate course?

Reasonable progress

The college has done a great deal of work in this area and early signs are positive. A new centralised admissions system, with clear processes and full training for staff, has been used this year after being piloted effectively in two academies last year. General processes for application are covered centrally, such as initial assessment, to ensure consistency. Subject staff carry out interviews to ensure prospective learners have a clear understanding of what their course will entail. For vulnerable learners and those with particular needs, specialist staff are involved at a very early stage of the application process and put in place targeted induction and transition packages.

Learners are happy about their course choice this year, with a score in the high nineties in the induction questionnaire. There are also highly positive scores

concerning the information they received and the ease of the enrolment process. Retention for the first term of this year is very high and shows an improvement when compared with the same period for last year. The college is aware it has further monitoring work to do and has set up processes to cover other indicators, such as the analysis of course transfers and early leavers.

What progress has been made in developing the promotion of equality and diversity, particularly within the classroom?

Significant progress

The college has put significant efforts into raising the profile of equality and diversity and in their promotion at all levels. A new management role has been developed to focus on inclusion and the performance of different groups of learners. Good staff development has clearly communicated the importance of equality and diversity and it has been embraced by staff. Subject area plans include challenging targets and teachers' promotion of equality and diversity is reviewed as part of performance management and through the lesson observation process.

The college promotes equality and diversity well in displays of learners' work, through the intranet and in marketing materials. In a few subject areas strategies to recruit non-traditional genders, for example, men into hairdressing and women into engineering, have been successful in raising numbers. Equality and diversity topics are an integral aspect of the tutorial provision and teachers are developing good opportunities to promote equality in their vocational lessons. Inspectors observed good integration of equality and diversity in their four joint observations. Teachers now share examples of good practice and successful lesson activities. A very good range of innovative projects has been developed across the college, such as vocational exchanges where hairdressing learners were instructed by motor vehicle engineers in how to change a tyre. The college's work with vulnerable groups is very good.

Leadership and management

How effectively has the use of the learner voice been developed to support improvements in provision?

Reasonable progress

All staff within the college place a very strong focus on listening to and acting upon learners' views. A wide range of strategies is in place to gather learners' views. Some are well-embedded, such as course representatives and student perceptions of course surveys. Others are relatively new, such as senior management team focus groups and learner-voice sections on teaching and learning observation forms. Learners feel their voice is listened to and can give numerous examples of changes that have taken place as a result of them expressing their views. These include changes to course structure and organisation, personal support and improvements in facilities.

Feedback to learners is stronger in some areas than others. Some learners are very clear about what has happened and why; others are not so sure about the outcomes of some points they have raised. The college is aware of this issue and is working hard on developing feedback strategies, for example, via the student magazine. Some of the newly introduced strategies are already showing a positive impact, such as changes arising from the learner-voice section of the observation form. However, it is too early to see their full impact as they have only been in place since September 2010.

How effectively have developments in leadership and management been embedded and the recovery plan been implemented?

Reasonable progress

The new principal joined the college in May 2010 and along with his senior managers has built upon the structure established by the previous acting principal to provide greater stability and reassurance to the staff and learners. The culture of the college is much improved. Roles and responsibilities and accountability are much clearer with greater emphasis on learners and the quality of provision. Managers are more accessible and open; this is recognised by staff in the improved grades in the recent staff survey. The college has significantly reduced its budget deficit and operating costs by £4 million while still investing in resources for learners. Staff costs as a percentage of the budget are now realistic and the financial recovery plan is ahead of schedule.

While the college did not meet its target for recruiting learner numbers in 2009/10, it maintained its overall income and senior staff and governors are very aware of the financial challenges ahead. Governors are committed to the college and have a good range of expertise to support and challenge senior staff. They are aware of the strengths and aspects requiring further improvement through their involvement with self-assessment, regular reports, training and meetings. Senior staff and governors are working hard to re-establish external links and raise the college's profile in the community and are justifiably proud of the recent improvements in learners' success rates.

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