

K College (formerly South Kent and West Kent Colleges)

Reinspection monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Richard Beaumont HMI

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Address: Brook Street
Tonbridge
TN9 2PW

Telephone number: 0845 2078220

REINSPECTION MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

On 1 April 2010, West Kent College and South Kent College were merged to form K College (corporation name 'South & West Kent College'). The main reason for the merger was as a result of the South Kent College Ofsted reinspection report of November 2009 that continued to judge the college's overall effectiveness to be inadequate. At the time of the monitoring visit, the college was in the final stages of establishing a new management team and harmonising cross-college policies and procedures. K College operates on five sites in Ashford, Dover, Folkestone, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells and offers programmes in all subject sectors other than agriculture, horticulture and animal care.

Of the seven themes explored during the visit, the first six are directly related to the former South Kent College with the remaining theme being directly related to the former West Kent College.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college made towards ensuring that an increasingly evaluative and critical self-assessment report leads to improvements? Reasonable progress

At the previous South Kent College reinspection, the self-assessment report was insufficiently critical. Since April 2010, K College has made reasonable progress in developing its self-assessment arrangements so that managers have more reliable information about the performance of the college and can take action to improve the provision.

The college held its first whole-college curriculum review boards in the summer term. This enabled the college to identify areas at risk and put into place revised arrangements for the autumn term. Self-assessment validation panels are more rigorous, and include external partners. The number of lessons graded as inadequate has reduced. However, inspectors found the grading less secure where a non-specialist was carrying out the lesson observation.

The college managers have analysed in great detail the reasons for the decline in success rates at level 1. They have strengthened course guidance and sought to widen options so that learners can choose courses which better reflect their skills and abilities. However, it is too early for inspectors to judge the impact of these actions. The best subject area reviews are detailed and evaluative, with clear actions for improvement, although they do not analyse equalities data at subject level and not all provide sufficient analysis of individual courses. The college's proposed draft summary grades do not adequately reflect the continuing volume of unsatisfactory provision.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made to improve low retention and success rates?

Reasonable progress

At the previous South Kent College reinspection, overall success and retention rates remained significantly below national averages. Since then, weekly senior management and monthly curriculum team meetings were introduced to monitor performance closely. In 2009/10, South Kent College overall long course success and retention rates improved by three percentage points to 72% and 81% respectively. National averages for similar colleges are 76% and 86% respectively.

Information and communication technology (ICT) long course success rates improved significantly in 2009/10 and are now well above national averages. Apart from a significant decline in long course success and retention rates for level 1 provision for 16- to 18-year-old learners, all other levels improved. The college has identified the main cause of this decline and has taken appropriate action. Train to Gain (T2G) and apprenticeship success rates have generally remained at the same level, as in 2008/09, at 85% and 69% respectively. Completion of qualifications in the agreed time for T2G learners has improved even further since the previous inspection and is now high at 81%. However, the similar rate for apprentices declined significantly in 2009/10 and is now well below the national average. Key and functional skill success rates declined slightly in 2009/10 to 41% and 46% respectively.

What progress has been made towards improving learners' attendance?

Insufficient progress

At the previous South Kent College reinspection, a key area for improvement was learners' attendance at lessons. For 2009/10, the college set a target of 85%. However, the actual rate remained the same as the previous year at 82%. Since the previous reinspection, pastoral tutors now monitor full time learners' attendance closely and take immediate action to contact absent learners. However, there is no clear evidence to support the effectiveness of these actions. Any other actions to improve attendance are generally localised and the impact of such actions is not always sufficiently clear. The college recognises that the analysis of attendance data is insufficiently thorough. Even though the college has set a challenging attendance target of 89% for 2010/11, no action plan or targets are set at programme level. The college policy applicable to the South Kent college sites lacks clarity with a limited focus on adults, particularly learners on part-time courses. The college recognises its lack of progress in improving attendance rates and has recently appointed a new vice principal who will have a direct responsibility for learners' attendance.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made towards improving the arrangements to plan, provide and monitor additional learning support? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous South Kent College reinspection, inspectors judged that the arrangements for additional learning support needed further development. The college has made reasonable progress to harmonise the arrangements and to give the area greater priority. Each site has its own team leader and good practice is shared across all sites. The college has appointed learning support liaison staff to work directly with subject teams and to spend time with teaching staff. Learners value the support they receive, finding that it has enabled them to complete their work and to become more independent as learners. Where appropriate, learners use equipment that enables them to take notes for themselves and manage their own learning. The paperwork has been amended so that learners can comment on the support they receive. However, the college has yet to use additional learning data in a way that sufficiently enables them to monitor performance for the college as a whole or at subject level.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made towards developing middle managers' skills to identify and tackle swiftly areas of underperformance? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous South Kent College reinspection, a key area for improvement was the need to develop middle managers' skills to identify and tackle underperformance promptly. Following the reinspection, middle managers completed training to improve their understanding and use of timely and reliable data. They were made more accountable for performance trends in their areas and regular monitoring meetings with senior managers were introduced. Middle managers and staff now have a much clearer focus on continuous improvement and the monitoring of learners' outcomes. Since the merger, the college has established a new management structure and team that integrate roles and responsibilities across all sites. Middle managers are positive about the new working arrangements and are clear on how to meet the strategic aims. Now that most management positions are in place, further training is planned including how to further recognise and improve 'value-added' measures.

What progress has the college made to improve the procedures to gather student views? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous South Kent College reinspection, the use of formal mechanisms for ensuring learners' views were taken into account was undeveloped. The college has made reasonable progress, harmonising the arrangements, so that all of the sites follow the same procedure.

One manager from student services has key responsibility for coordinating learner-voice activity across the college. Formal learner surveys are conducted three times a year and a common on-line induction survey has been completed this academic year. The college is developing, across all its sites, a permanent on-line student forum, which can be accessed by staff and is well used by students. On a weekly basis, 'learner-voice' groups are convened across the college and asked specific questions about their experience at the college, including teaching and learning, personal safety and equality and diversity. The results of these surveys are used to evaluate the provision, and action has already been taken in response to learners' views where appropriate. Learners have been invited to review college policies as part of the harmonisation process. Although the arrangements have improved, inspectors found that not all students were clear whether their views had been heard.

What progress has the college made in ensuring the quality of its data collection to accurately inform management and check the validity of success rates? Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection of West Kent College, improvements have been made to the way data are collected and the protocols for managing student enrolments. Before 2010/11, students working towards BTEC qualifications at level 3 were commonly enrolled onto a national award as a starting qualification before progressing to a national diploma. Although value-added data suggest that progress for students at level 3 was good overall, it does not indicate whether students reached their full potential of a national diploma. For 2010/11 students are now enrolled directly onto their final qualification. This will provide a more accurate measurement of their success.

Historic success rate data for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), adult literacy, numeracy and key skills are likely to be unreliable owing to the large number, and poor timeliness, of changes in the individual learner record. Through routine monitoring and review of the college's risk register, the college recognises these issues and is in the process of improving staff training, strengthening communication with outreach centres, and introducing new systems for the generation of registers. Previous self-assessment reports include insufficient reference to the impact of unreliable data or to arrangements for improvement. At the time of the monitoring visit, the 2010/11 self-assessment report was still in draft form, so it is too early to judge whether it will contain a better focus on the accuracy and validity of success rates.

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester, M2 7LA

T: 08456 404040
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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