

Royal National College for the Blind

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent specialist college

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

The Royal National College for the Blind is an independent specialist residential college with charitable status, and is a company limited by guarantee.

The college provides education and training for students who are blind and visually impaired. At the time of the monitoring visit, there were 136 residential and eight day students of whom 68% were aged 19 years and over. Of those, the majority were funded by the residential training unit (RTU) through the Department for Work and Pensions or were funded by the Welsh Assembly. Some 16% of students were of minority ethnic heritage. A new principal was appointed in January 2010. The college is in the process of realigning its strategic direction and structure with the aim to provide a greater focus on developing students' independence and employability.

The last full inspection report was in June 2008. The college's overall effectiveness, outcomes for learners, capacity to improve and leadership and management were graded as good. The quality of provision was judged to be outstanding. A focused monitoring visit took place in July 2009.

This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in strengthening quality improvement arrangements and using self-assessment to evaluate clearly the college's performance?

Reasonable progress

The management of quality improvement, both to increase consistency across the provision and to share good practice, has continued to improve. College data show that the proportion of good or better lessons rose in 2009/10 from 55% to 88%. Given the sharp increase in this profile, the college has further strengthened its process of moderation in order to ensure grading is accurate.

Formal systems for checking on the impact of actions are more frequent. A range of audits and 'spot checks' are in place to evaluate the impact of actions taken, although some of these are relatively recent. Reporting and evaluation across many areas are becoming increasingly systematic with a clearer focus on impact which is enabling the college to plan for improvement more effectively. The college's self-assessment report however, does not provide sufficient evidence of impact in all areas of the college's work. The use and analysis of data continues to improve but trend data is underused to demonstrate sustained improvement over time.

The college's quality improvement plan is monitored frequently and identifies clearly progress made against targets. Many targets are precise, although in a minority of cases, such as improving the quality of teaching and learning, they are less explicit.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in successfully achieving qualifications compared to the previous year, particularly at intermediate level in numeracy and literacy?

Significant progress

Overall, the high attainment achieved through accredited qualifications was maintained or improved upon in 2009/10. Success rates for the majority of accredited qualifications improved on the previous year. Achievement in literacy and numeracy at intermediate level improved notably with success rates for numeracy rising from 47% to 66% and in literacy rising from 54% to 80%.

An increased focus on individual target setting and continuity of departmental staff has contributed to the steadily improving proportion of students achieving higher grades. The achievement of A to C grades at both GCE AS and GCE A level improved markedly in 2009/10.

What progress has been made in improving the retention of RTU students?

Significant progress

Retention for RTU students improved in 2009/10 from 93% to 95%, with college data suggesting a positive trend continuing into the autumn term. In addition to the frequent monitoring of students' retention, adjustments to the curriculum such as the introduction of shorter courses, has proved popular for RTU students by allowing more frequent visits to their families. The attendance of RTU students has also seen a marked improvement from 88% to 94% and the proportion of unauthorised absences has decreased. Initiatives, such as the '100% club', launched in January 2010, which acknowledges those students who have full attendance on a weekly basis, are proving increasingly popular with students. Currently over a third of students have been listed in the weekly club. The impact of punctuality has also been strengthened.

The retention for younger students fell slightly from 97% to 95% in 2009/10. Although improved, the rise in attendance was less marked for younger students rising from 90% to 91%.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving the quality and consistency of target setting including the timely planning of staff development to support this?

Reasonable progress

The college has notably increased the number of lesson observations it undertakes annually and has focused these observations on scrutinising more carefully the quality of individual target setting. In addition, observers now apply a 'limiting' lesson grade of no better than satisfactory if the setting of students' individual targets do not meet the standard expected. The college's quality audits to date show that

consistency is improving but the college recognise that further work is required to ensure good practice is more widespread. Staff development on target setting has taken place and is more focused on how to set challenging targets for students; however, it is too early to judge the full impact of these actions.

Leadership and management

How much progress has the college made in embedding equality and diversity across the curriculum?

Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection, the college has continued to raise the profile of equality and diversity. Greater awareness amongst governors, managers, staff and students now exists. Plans to expand the promotion of other equality strands, such as sexual orientation, are in place for this academic year. Equality themes are gradually being integrated within lessons. An external audit by the college was undertaken earlier in the autumn term to look specifically at the promotion in lessons. The subsequent report indicated an increasing number of lessons are actively planning for and promoting equality themes.

Equality impact assessments are now completed, although some are too perfunctory. The college has recognised this and plans are in place to revisit these with greater scrutiny this year. The analysis and use of data continues to develop and be used more readily in decision-making; however, data, particularly but not exclusively on student performance, are not always analysed or reported in sufficient detail.

How much progress has the college made in using the views of students, employers and other users to promote improvement?

Reasonable progress

The college has devised a clear and comprehensive learner involvement strategy. Students' views are sought more frequently through focus groups and through a recently introduced student and staff consultative forum. Where students make suggestions for improvement the college is swift to respond. The number of returns to the student annual survey, particularly for adult students, is, however, relatively low.

Students' involvement in more strategic decision-making is still developing. A few students who were involved in giving feedback as part of course reviews felt this was very beneficial and enjoyable. Students' contribution to course review and self-assessment is not yet routine across all areas of the college. The college does not yet report clearly enough on the views of different groups of students.

Employer, parent and other stakeholder views are collected both formally and informally but are not always used to best effect as an integral part of improvement planning. The use of student, employer and other user views to support judgments through the self-assessment report is not used enough.

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