

Weston College

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Weston College is North Somerset's further education college, consisting of three campuses in Weston-super-Mare and Nailsea. These include a sixth form and university centre in Weston, a new skills centre for construction and engineering, and a business and enterprise centre working with more than 300 employers in the region. In the academic year 2009/10 there were over 5,000 students on full-time courses, with roughly equal proportions of students aged 16 to 18 and adults. In addition, work-based learners included over 500 apprentices and close to 2,000 learners on Train to Gain programmes. Higher education continues to be a major feature of the college's provision, with 450 undergraduates on foundation or honours degree courses.

As a result of being judged a 'good' college in the previous inspection, none of the subject areas were inspected in depth at the college's most recent inspection at the end of January 2008. In 2008, inspectors judged that the college's overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision, and leadership and management were good.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has Weston College made in ensuring that self-assessment is rectifying areas for improvement from the last inspection?	Significant progress
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Self-assessment was comprehensive and accurately identified strengths and areas for improvement at the last inspection. The college provides compelling evidence of a successfully shared culture of continuous improvement. Managers have refined and strengthened quality assurance processes, contributing to an improvement in outcomes for learners and to a self-assessment process that is rigorous and makes good use of a broad range of evidence. The college makes particularly good and regular use of students' views to inform quality improvement at course level. Managers rightly point to how new quality assurance and self-assessment arrangements allow for improved monitoring of performance during the academic year, in particular of areas causing concern, enabling them to measure more readily the impact of improvements.

The college has made good progress in rectifying areas for improvement from the previous inspection, for example the improvement of retention rates, particularly at level 1 and foundation level.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has Weston College made in improving outcomes for learners, and in addressing retention rates, particularly at level 1?

Significant progress

At the time of the last inspection success rates were above average for the majority of students on long courses. However, retention rates for students aged 16 to 18 and adults were an area for improvement. Retention rates on long courses at all levels show a significant improvement trend since the inspection. The college has made significant improvements to success rates for students in both age groups since the last inspection, and in particular at level 1 and foundation level. Success rates for these students were well above average in 2009/10.

Success rates for students aged 16 to 18 in 2009/10 were above average at both intermediate and advanced levels. Improvements have been more difficult to secure at intermediate and advanced level for adults, and their success rates were broadly average in 2009/10. However, strategies to improve students' outcomes in these areas are well considered and tailored closely to the needs of these learners; good quality assurance systems and use of management information allow close monitoring of measures taken.

Short-course performance was below average in 2008/09, with underperformance by adults in courses of between 5 and 24 weeks a particular concern. The college has successfully improved short-course performance, so that it was above average in 2009/10.

Overall success rates for apprentices and the proportion that completed within their planned end date were both above average in 2008/09. The proportion of learners on Train to Gain programmes completing within their planned end date was well above average.

Quality of provision

What progress has Weston College made in improving the rigour of lesson observation and subsequent action planning?

Significant progress

Teaching and learning were good at the last inspection. However, the college over-estimated the quality of teaching and learning in its self-assessment and had not sufficiently analysed information gained through its observation system to provide a clear overview of the quality of teaching and learning. Improvements since the last inspection include establishing more formal links between the actions identified and staff development. Following the introduction of a new management structure and a new quality team, the arrangements for lesson observation have been significantly strengthened. They show evidence of continuing improvement to ensure that they are appropriate and provide a precise and reliable assessment of the quality of teaching and learning in the college.

In the lesson observations that inspectors carried out alongside college observers, college observers highlighted key points accurately, providing deft summary and evaluation. However, observers had a tendency to over-emphasise good points and under-emphasise areas for development, particularly where these had significant impact on learning. Recent use of the new process shows observation records with clear judgements. Commentary mostly matches grades awarded and provides teachers with a clear agenda on what they need to do to improve. These observations show a much more critical and thorough approach.

What progress has Weston College made in the formalisation and effectiveness of arrangements to share good practice in teaching and learning across the college?

Significant progress

The last inspection report points to effective, targeted activities to raise standards of teaching and learning. However, formal mechanisms to disseminate good practice across the college were less well developed. Since then the college has changed staff development arrangements to enable more systematic sharing of good practice and regular follow up of areas for development identified through the observation process. Managers have ensured formal sharing of good practice across faculties. Faculty teams now use standardised agendas to include an element of sharing of good practice in teaching and learning. Staff development days planned in October and February allow staff to use new and better approaches immediately with their students. Training in July focuses on themes identified from action plans from the lesson observation process and is led by those staff identified as outstanding practitioners in teaching and learning.

Since the last inspection, mentors are helping teachers within allied subject areas to improve their practice through peer observations and by providing useful guidance. The college has examples of very good use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) and other examples of innovative teaching that are shared effectively through

posters, newsletters and the college's good practice database. A very good set of guidance and exemplars is available for all staff and is used particularly to help new teachers develop skills in, for example, using questioning to check learning and develop students' understanding.

What progress has Weston College made in ensuring that target-setting for students is of a consistently high standard?

Significant progress

The significant progress made in improving the setting of learning targets for students is evident from available value added data from a wide range of qualifications, and increases in the number of work-based learners who gain their qualification before their planned end date. Those students interviewed pointed to an increased emphasis on target-setting in one-to-one progress reviews. They found this very useful in supporting their achievement. The college has brought forward the capture of learners' prior qualifications to enable targets to be agreed with students in a timely way. The system is sufficiently flexible to enable target setting to meet the needs of individual learners and their work, whether they are on foundation level courses, on apprenticeships, or studying for A levels. Systems to assure the quality of target setting are comprehensive and support more readily the identification of those learners who are 'at risk' of not achieving. They include the training of tutors in target setting, a set of minimum standards for tutors, the audit of individual learning plans, and the observation of one-to-one tutorials.

The college has done some valuable work in identifying a correlation between those subjects in AS and A level that had better value added scores – indicating that students made better progress – and those which had higher lesson observation grades and were characterised by more effective individualised learning. Lesson observation in 2009/10 was identified among a number of themes for improvement, including the effective use of planned differentiated activities to ensure appropriate stretch and challenge for individual learners.

What progress has Weston College made in planning extension tasks in lessons to stretch and challenge the more able students?

Reasonable progress

At the last inspection students with identified additional learning support needs were supported well through differentiated classroom activities. However, the use of extension activities to stretch and challenge more able students was less well developed. Teachers have structured their courses to respond flexibly when students have the potential to work at a higher level. Effective strategies adopted by teachers within curriculum areas have resulted in significant improvement in students' progress, which is particularly strong in vocational areas. Some teachers use well-planned, on-line learning modules – both as videos and additional learning materials – which students can download and use on their own media or through the VLE, in order to extend their learning or take additional units. In other areas, teachers work

closely to ensure students are working at their full potential. For example, in creative arts, students working on the same project brief have individual targets written up at their work stations. This enables teachers to check students' progress and to promote challenge and standards of work at the highest level. However, teachers' understanding of how to build extension tasks remains underdeveloped. Their use of questioning, either to check learning or extend students' understanding, is not yet fully effective across the college. Lesson observation records show this to be a work in progress.

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