

Tower Hamlets College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Tony Noonan HMI

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Address: Tower Hamlets College
112 Poplar High Street
London
E14 0AF

Telephone number: 02075 107510

FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Tower Hamlets College is a general further education college in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in east London. There are two main centres: Poplar, next to Canary Wharf, and Arbour Square in Stepney. Other centres include Oxford House in Bethnal Green and East India Dock Road. Part-time Skills for Life programmes are offered in over 15 community venues throughout the borough. Tower Hamlets continues to be one of the most deprived areas in the country. The college provides vocational and academic programmes for both young people and adults in 12 of the 15 sector subject areas. In 2009/10, the college had 18,986 enrolments, with students aged 19 and over constituting 66% of enrolments.

The previous inspection in May 2009 reported the overall effectiveness of the college to be satisfactory with good capacity to improve. Achievements and standards were satisfactory, and the quality of provision and leadership and management were good.

This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, which included the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection report.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in using quality assurance systems more effectively and consistently?

Reasonable progress

Quality assurance systems have improved since the last inspection and are now used more consistently across the college. The self-assessment report (SAR) is honest and self-critical. Course reviews are more rigorous. Managers monitor the performance of courses and individual students very regularly. The introduction of an e-tracker system to monitor students' progress successfully enables subject lecturers, personal tutors and students to monitor progress on-line effectively. The work of tutorial support workers, who help students identified as at risk of underperformance, is now part of the quality assurance process. Teachers are now fully involved in assisting students to achieve their targets and improve the quality of the provision.

Some failing courses have been discontinued due to low rates of achievement. New foundation level courses offer clearer progression pathways for students. An initial six-week period of induction involving extensive assessment, termed 'Bridging the gap', was introduced for students transferring to a course of a higher level. Recruitment, induction and assessment processes are improved and course entry criteria are applied more stringently. However, it is too soon to predict what impact these new procedures will have on raising learners' success rates.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving learners' outcomes since the last inspection, including the performance of different groups, and the progress of learners relative to their prior qualifications and experience?

Insufficient progress

Learners' retention rates increased significantly between 2008/09 and 2009/10 for students of all ages and at all levels. However, during the same period, achievement rates fell for the large number of learners of all ages taking entry level or foundation courses, and for learners aged 16 to 18 on intermediate courses. Despite an increase in achievement rates at advanced level, the overall rate of improvement is too slow considering the very large gap between college achievement rates and national figures. Achievement rates for learners taking short courses in 2009/10 also fell. The performance of learners belonging to the largest minority ethnic groups attending the college largely reflects the performance patterns for the college as a whole. Success rates for learners on Train to Gain programmes have improved and they are now comparable to national averages.

The progress of learners relative to their prior qualifications and experience was judged as a key area for improvement at the last inspection. This is still the case for AS- and A-level learners, whose value-added performance was relatively poor over the last three years. The performance of learners taking vocational programmes has been better than expected for the past three years.

Quality of provision

What actions have taken place to increase the proportion of teaching and learning that is no better than satisfactory?

Reasonable progress

All managers and staff recognise that improving the quality of teaching and learning is a college priority. Since the last inspection, outcomes of the college's teaching observation scheme are used more effectively to identify areas for improvement. Staff training in 2009/10 included the use of information and learning technology (ILT) to support learning. This has enabled many lecturers to use more creative teaching methods and engage students well in active learning. However, a few staff are still not fully confident in the use of the technology and require more 'hands on' support. Initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and learning include peer observations, which are ungraded, and team teaching.

The college's grade profile for lesson observations shows a significant increase in the number of sessions graded as good or better during 2009/10. The staff who carry out observations have received some training and joint observations are carried out to moderate findings. However, insufficient evidence is included to support the judgements in some records of observations. Senior managers have revised procedures for the new academic year to include support through mentoring for all teachers whose sessions were graded below good.

What actions have taken place to improve the rigour and the monitoring of learners' individual target setting? **Reasonable progress**

After running a pilot project last year, on-line personal learning plans were introduced this academic year for all full-time learners. This makes it easier for subject teachers to make their comments on the progress of learners widely available. In the better personal learning plans, tutors use these comments constructively to set appropriate and time-bound individual learning targets that are agreed with learners. However, there is still inconsistency in their quality, with general targets that often focus on the completion of assignments by a deadline, rather than targets that focus on the skills learners need in order to raise their standard of work.

Management procedures for monitoring the completion and effectiveness of personal learning plans are being established. It is too early to measure the impact of these new target-setting procedures on raising learners' achievement rates.

What progress has been made in improving the quality of provision in hairdressing and beauty therapy? **Reasonable progress**

The college evaluated hairdressing and beauty therapy provision as inadequate in its 2008/09 self-assessment report. Since then, actions taken by staff have led to improvements in the quality of provision. A radical review of the curriculum has led to changes in the programmes offered, with shorter, full-cost recovery courses offered as evening provision. More coherent progression pathways are now in place for learners. Greater emphasis is placed on initial assessment procedures to ensure learners are placed on the most appropriate level of course.

New managers communicate well with staff. The progress of learners is monitored rigorously and learners at risk of underperforming are identified at an early stage. Such learners receive additional support by attending extra workshops and teaching sessions held during college vacations. Overall retention rates have improved dramatically, from 66% in 2008/09 to 83.5% in 2009/10. However, learners' outcomes are still low for some courses.

What progress has been made in improving the quality of provision in literacy? **Reasonable progress**

A thorough review of literacy provision has taken place since the college's 2008/09 SAR judged it to be inadequate, and reasonable progress has been made to improve the quality of provision. Success rates have increased, although they are still below the national averages. Staff have explored ways of improving the curriculum and a change of awarding body has led to students' results now being available within a reasonable time frame. Courses were adjusted so that they matched the very wide range of learners' needs and aspirations. Students can now take functional skills

courses that reflect their particular literacy needs, such as improving their writing. The curriculum now includes vocational courses at foundation level, with embedded functional skills, as well as a pathway to supported employment. The college has placed a stronger focus on identifying specific needs, and recognising these in the students' personal learning plans. However, these broader goals are not always reflected well in schemes of work.

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

T: 08456 404040
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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