

Bromley College of Further and Higher Education

Focused monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 130430

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Last day of inspection: 9 June 2011

Type of provider: General further education college

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Bromley College is a general further education college located in south east London. It provides courses in almost all vocational areas of learning with 40% of enrolments at foundation level or below and few short courses. The London Borough of Bromley is a relatively prosperous area. However, students travel to the college from across London with only 41% of 16- to 18-year-old students living in Bromley. Around 54% of the students are White British, compared to 92% of the population in the borough.

At the previous inspection, in November 2008, all major aspects at the college were judged to be satisfactory, excepting equality of opportunity which was graded as good. Six sector subject areas were directly inspected; engineering and manufacturing technologies and hair and beauty therapy were judged to be good, the others satisfactory.

Since the previous inspection the college has had a new principal and major building works have been completed. The college is in the final stages of a planned merger with Orpington College.

The previous inspection report listed five main recommendations and those form the basis of the themes for this visit, along with themes on work experience and accommodation.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in making the self-assessment process more accurate? Reasonable progress

The college has improved the rigour and accuracy of its self-assessment process and this is reflected in the 2009/10 self-assessment report which, in the main, is realistic and honest in identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

Since the appointment of a new principal less than a year ago staff have been adapting to a new performance management culture, with a sharper focus on targets and key performance indicators at school and programme area level. Heads of schools, teachers and course teams are now explicitly accountable for the performance of their students and this has encouraged them to take a more systematic approach to self-assessment and target setting.

Detailed and evaluative school self-assessment reports draw on an appropriate range of evidence to support judgements. Managers regularly and meticulously monitor progress against targets outlined in the school quality improvement plans. This has enabled the college to identify under-performing provision at a sufficiently early stage, to take appropriate action and to limit any negative impact on students.

School plans are well linked to the overall improvement plan, which identifies the key challenges facing the college in its quest to accelerate the pace of improvement still further and to raise standards. The college is on track to meet most of its 2010/11 key performance targets.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving pass and success rates across the college? Reasonable progress

Achievements and standards at the previous inspection were judged to be satisfactory. Some success rates, such as long courses at intermediate and advanced levels, were below national averages, but there was a general trend of improvement.

At the end of the inspection year, 2008/9, overall success rates had improved still further, by nearly five percentage points, although they were still five points below national averages. The rate of improvement was much less in 2009/10, when there was a one percentage point increase to an overall rate of 76%, four points below a static national average. In that year pass rates improved well, but retention dropped. Intermediate and advanced levels outcomes remain below national averages, but the gap has almost halved since the previous inspection.

The performance by differing groups of students is reasonably well analysed with some generalised college-wide activities to support poorer performing groups. The impact is mixed, with some improvements and some declining rates.

In low performing areas, critical analysis of causes has led to appropriate measures to deal with identified problems. A range of college initiatives is now clearly aimed at raising success rates. In-year retention data suggest there has been a reasonable improvement on the previous year. Key aspects of work-based learning have improved well over the past two years, with Train to Gain results moving from a poor position to a satisfactory level.

What progress has been made in improving attendance and punctuality? Reasonable progress

Attendance and punctuality were areas for concern at the previous inspection, and the college's self-assessment also highlighted the need for improvements. There have been a variety of changes since the previous inspection, with the result that attendance rates have improved in each of the last two years, and the in-year recorded punctuality is at a good level.

One of the main changes has been in the more extensive use of administrative support to help tutors in the initial checking of missing students and encouraging their return to college. Data from registers and improved administrative recording are now better used by heads of schools and tutors to monitor students and take appropriate action following poor attendance or punctuality. There has been satisfactory sharing of various minor initiatives for encouraging attendance and punctuality. A reasonable degree of autonomy is given to schools as to how to deal

with recalcitrant students, but the minimum actions to be taken are not clearly laid out in college procedures.

Attendance is part of a satisfactory college-wide action plan to improve retention. However, the college has been unable to identify the reason why attendance rose in 2009/10 but retention fell, and therefore take necessary corrective action.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in ensuring that individual learner target setting for students is more rigorous and appropriate?

Reasonable progress

Individual target setting was another key weakness at the previous inspection, with some tutors setting targets well, but too often there was a lack of precision and some over or under challenge for students.

One of the more significant changes since the previous inspection has been the introduction of an electronic system for recording student targets. This has been backed up with further staff training, both on the system and general advice on target setting, as well as improvements in the way that students are encouraged to use their targets to aid progress. There are now some very good examples of targets which are clear and relevant to the students. The revised approach is also aiding communication between staff, and allowing better monitoring of individual and group performance. There is evidence that, in some areas, the better approach is aiding performance, retention and attendance.

However, the approach and improvements in target setting are still not yet fully embedded across the college. There are still many targets which are general or just focus on attendance and general exhortations to students to complete units.

What progress has been made in helping students obtain work experience where relevant?

Significant progress

Although not a key recommendation in the previous inspection, the subject area inspectors, and subsequently the college in its self-assessment, noted a need for more opportunities for work experience for students.

Over the past two years there has been a significant improvement in the number of students getting relevant work experience, with an increase of around 60% in the most recent year. Changes that have helped this have included moving central resources into schools that have a significant proportion of mandatory work experience requirements, whilst optional work experience is handled by a dedicated central team. A computer-based system is now used across the college to share information on employers and ensure there is no duplication of effort. Partnership working with Orpington College has given access to more employers and resources. An increased number of events at college for employers have strengthened employer links and opportunities for work experience. An increasing emphasis on work-based learning has also helped with employer engagement. Where work experience is not

available there are some interesting alternatives to help students develop skills, such as supporting catering outlets in the college or workplace visits. Evidence indicates that success rates are improving on courses with greater work experience.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the rigour and effectiveness of observations of teaching and learning and then aiding staff development?

Reasonable progress

The college's analysis of the quality of teaching and learning suggests that more than three quarters of lessons are good or better and very few are inadequate. As acknowledged in the college's self-assessment report, this improvement is yet to be reflected in students' outcomes.

Over the last few years, managers have invested considerable time and energy attempting to improve the quality of teaching and learning. They have refined the lesson observation system, provided staff with appropriate support and training and taken advice from external consultants. Moderation has contributed to improvements in the consistency of lesson grades. Observers provide teachers with helpful feedback and identify relevant action points. However, as at the time of the last inspection, feedback still focuses too much on what the teacher does in the lesson and too little on what students achieve in terms of the knowledge and skills they gain and the level at which they are working.

In the current academic year there has been a greater focus on linking teachers' post-observation action plans more effectively to staff development activities. Managers make appropriate use of data to analyse grades, strengths and areas for development. Although the software used provides useful quantitative information, it is not sufficiently flexible to incorporate the detail and subtleties of observers' comments. This, in turn, hampers the extent to which training and support can be tailored to meet the needs of individual teachers.

What progress has been made in improving the college accommodation to enhance learning?

Reasonable progress

Students and staff benefit from a pleasant, safe and well-maintained campus. Since the last inspection, information technology resources have been upgraded and most areas of the college have been refurbished, including common rooms and cafés. The overcrowding in engineering workshops and hairdressing and beauty therapy salons, identified at the previous inspection, is no longer a concern for the college.

Students enrolled on hairdressing and beauty therapy courses work in newly-refurbished salons that reflect commercial standards and this is preparing them well for employment.

The recent, substantial investment in accommodation includes a new technology centre that provides students with access to very high quality, industry-standard specialist resources. It incorporates engineering, motor vehicle, construction and

electrical installation and this year the college has also been able to offer a new course in motor cycle maintenance and repair. Staff take great pride in the new resources. They value highly the fact that their students are working in a pleasant environment and acquiring vocational skills using equipment that is as good as, or even better than, that used by employers.

The impact of refurbishment and the new accommodation and resources is reflected, to some extent, in an increase in applications and improved attendance and retention in the relevant curriculum areas. The extent to which this translates into improved performance by students is yet to be evaluated.

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