

City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

The City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College is a medium-sized college. It relocated to a new building near to the city centre and railway station in August 2010. The college serves an area of considerable deprivation. It has provision in 12 of the 15 sector subject areas. Approximately 1,800 students are enrolled, of whom most are aged 16 to 18. Most students study on advanced level courses, with over a third following a combined course of GCE and vocational qualifications.

The most recent inspection report was published in March 2009. The college was judged satisfactory in all aspects. This report focuses on the themes explored during the monitoring visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college made through its self-assessment process to improve all aspects of its provision?

Insufficient progress

The self-assessment report is evaluative and identifies correctly the main strengths and areas for improvement in relation to the themes considered during the monitoring visit. The self-assessment process is inclusive and makes good use of data and other management information to provide evidence to justify the grades awarded. The self-assessment report states, however, that the actions taken to address the areas for improvement identified have had insufficient impact in improving provision and students' outcomes. The vast majority of grades awarded within the 2009/10 self-assessment are the same as those awarded in 2008/09. All of the main aspects, including capacity to improve, are self-assessed as satisfactory.

During the current academic year, managers have monitored the areas for improvement, identified within the latest self-assessment report, more rigorously and improvements are being made. They acknowledge correctly, however, that the in-year impact of actions taken is insufficient and they anticipate little change to the self-assessed grades for 2010/11. Managers take action on the areas for improvement identified in the quality improvement plan as scheduled. The impact of such interventions on improving outcomes for students taking AS subjects remains a cause for concern since current retention rates for several very popular subjects are below national averages.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made to increase the success rates of, and the progress made by, students on advanced level courses? **Insufficient progress**

Success rates on advanced level courses for students aged 16 to 18 have been the same for three years and are well below national averages. For students aged 19 and over, success rates have decreased significantly over three years and are low. Success rates for students aged 16 to 18 taking AS and GCE A-level subjects have been very similar for three years and are low. Success rates for students aged 19 and over taking AS and GCE A-level subjects have stayed the same or have decreased in the last three years. The main cause of low success rates on GCE provision is low pass rates, whereas for vocational courses the main factor is low retention rates. Current in-year data indicate similar overall retention rates compared with the same month in the previous two years; increasing noticeably on vocational courses, but decreasing on AS subjects.

The progress which students make compared with their prior attainment has not increased in the last three years. This is most noticeable on vocational courses, but these data exclude about a quarter of students who take a hybrid programme of GCE and vocational qualifications. Managers have taken action to remove consistently underperforming provision.

Quality of provision

What progress have teachers made in planning for and delivering sufficient challenge to students in lessons? **Reasonable progress**

Students' experiences of being suitably challenged and motivated in lessons are variable. In the best lessons, each student feels challenged according to ability and potential. In the less effective lessons, all students do the same activities at, and for, the same time. Most lessons are enjoyable and proceed at a steady pace, but many increase in urgency and challenge as examinations approach. Performance management targets include teachers giving suitable challenges to all their students. Managers and teachers provide staff development events which focus on 'stretch and challenge'. They have shared good practice in the sport and health and social care areas, regarding planning for and delivering challenge to students, with staff in the information and communication technology and business areas. Staff make good use of students' feedback on lessons to improve practice, but they are aware of the need to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Managers are rightly concerned about the insufficient challenge of students in lessons to ensure they maximise their potential, especially in certain vocational courses. They encourage teachers to vary their approaches to learning to meet the range of students' needs. They intervene appropriately in areas where support has been less successful.

What progress has the college made in improving the precision of students' learning targets, the consistency of individual learning plans and in tutoring for achievement?

Reasonable progress

All students have targets, which include minimum grades as well as personal development aims, in their individual learning plans. In the best examples, students have very useful and personalised targets and plans which help them to progress. In the less effective cases, students have general targets which are not peculiar to them and are of little assistance in enabling their progress. Many students benefit from in-depth one-to-one tutorials which are formative and helpful; others have meetings which are too rushed. Tutors have accessible and much enhanced on-line current information about students to facilitate their individual tutorials.

Managers are aware of the inconsistencies in the use of individual learning plans and in tutoring for achievement. They know how to improve such matters by using fewer, more specialist staff and by enabling students to be more aware of the advantages of target setting and tutorials. Managers and senior achievement tutors provide much good professional development and support to tutors whose skills are less advanced. Although target setting and tutoring have improved, too many targets are imprecise. The quality of the 'learning conversations' has improved but the recording of these conversations is often terse. The emphasis on tutorials for achievement has increased since the previous inspection.

What progress has the college made in monitoring the performance of different and under-represented groups of students?

Reasonable progress

The success rates of male students aged 16 to 18 have increased slightly over the last three years but are low, because of their low pass rates. Male students aged 19 and over, however, have high success rates. The success rates of female students aged 19 and over have decreased significantly, but are average. Managers and staff have been very successful in increasing the success rates and attendance of female students on intermediate level provision since the previous inspection. They adjusted timetables and integrated teaching teams to provide intermediate level students with a more coherent provision. The success rates of small numbers of students aged 16 to 18 from minority ethnic backgrounds are low, whereas those for students aged 19 and over from such backgrounds are at least average. The success rates of students aged 16 to 18 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have increased but are low, whereas those for students aged 19 and over have increased and are high.

Managers analyse data by different groups very carefully and accurately and reach correct conclusions. They use data successfully to inform intervention to retain students at risk and enable their progress. Nevertheless, success rates of certain groups of students remain low.

What progress has the college made with the provision of suitable and worthwhile work experience for students?

Significant progress

Opportunities for students to engage in work experience were underdeveloped at the previous inspection. Since then managers have made significant progress to improve work-experience opportunities and most students on vocational courses now complete work-experience placements as part of their programme of study. The college now works with a much larger number of employers and organisations that provide students with a wide range of worthwhile work-experience opportunities. These enhance the curriculum and develop students' employability skills.

Students on academic programmes now benefit from a more extensive range of work-related learning opportunities. Trips, visits and guest speakers provide students on most courses with an insight into career opportunities within their chosen subject. Course teams ensure that they incorporate work-related learning opportunities into schemes of work and evaluate the effectiveness of the activities completed. Individual students requesting specific work-experience opportunities receive good support from staff to find suitable placements. The college promotes work-experience and work-related learning well and celebrates the success of students' achievements.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made with its quality improvement strategies to increase students' outcomes?

Reasonable progress

Managers have strengthened quality assurance arrangements since the previous inspection. They focus more clearly on raising achievement rates. Managers use the college's 'support and intervention' procedure more comprehensively to review courses that are identified as underperforming. They monitor the quality of provision thoroughly, resulting in a detailed report and an action plan that identifies accurately the areas requiring improvement. Managers review action plans frequently and monitor progress closely. When course teams engage with this beneficial process, the quality of provision and outcomes for students improve. Support and intervention are not successful, however, in improving provision in all areas. In the less effective examples, improvement actions have too little impact. The impact on current students' success rates is unlikely to be significant, since actions are intended to improve provision in the longer term.

Managers have strengthened the arrangements to monitor students' attendance, retention and progress by more frequent monitoring and review. Governors receive more detailed information about the impact of quality improvement strategies and provide more effective support and challenge. Staff share good practice more extensively. It is too early to judge the full impact of these initiatives in terms of student success rates.

What progress has the college made with the effectiveness of its lesson observation and performance management systems to agree and review teachers' targets?

Reasonable progress

Managers monitor the quality of teaching and learning more effectively than was the case at the previous inspection. Lesson observations conducted as part of the college's support and intervention strategy are very useful in identifying both good practice and areas for improvement in the subject areas covered so far. These observations provide a more realistic picture of the quality of teaching and learning within the college and enable the provision of appropriately targeted staff development. So far, managers have undertaken too few observations of this type. The observations of teachers in other areas of the college have only been completed as part of the college's formal performance management system.

Managers agree targets for teachers to achieve as part of their performance management arrangements. These are informed by lesson observation outcomes and by separate management information data which relates to students' outcomes and course performance. Most targets relate to subject or college improvement plans. Most targets are more precise than was the case previously and allow for staff to be held to account for their performance more effectively. In other cases, targets are underdeveloped and their effectiveness in improving provision and students' outcomes is less evident.

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