

Northbrook College

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Northbrook College is a medium-sized further education college located at two sites in Worthing and at Shoreham Airport. It manages two skills centres in Littlehampton and Kingston Buci, in partnership with local schools. The college offers predominantly vocational courses from entry level to higher education in all 15 subject areas.

In 2009/10 the college had 2,039 full-time and 7,042 part-time students on roll, with a further 2,002 students in adult and community learning provision. Almost half the college's students were over 19 years of age. During the year, it had 2,398 learners on Train to Gain programmes and 658 apprentices.

At the inspection in February 2009, all key aspects of the college's work and its overall effectiveness were satisfactory. In work-based learning, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management were good. In November 2009, the college appointed a new Principal and its senior management team was restructured. This report focuses on themes explored during this monitoring visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college made to ensure that self-assessment and quality assurance procedures are applied consistently and lead to improvement in provision?

Significant progress

At the previous inspection, the college's self-assessment report was broadly accurate. Its quality assurance procedures were satisfactory but were not having sufficient impact on all provision. Since then, the college's new Principal and restructured senior management team have improved line management and support for underperforming areas. They set clear targets for improvement and have developed suitable processes for improving the quality of provision. Curriculum leaders and managers now make much better use of management information and data on attendance and learning plans to monitor the performance of individual students and courses at their monthly departmental reviews. Senior managers make good use of data and curriculum reports at their quarterly quality reviews. They take prompt and appropriate action to deal with any concerns. The college's lesson observation scheme is now more rigorous and used well in course reviews. Most course reviews are evaluative and the college knows what it needs to do to improve. However, a small number of planned actions are not yet sufficiently specific. Managers pay much attention to gathering the views of students and take action in response. They have been effective in improving, for example, the curriculum, enrichment, and the quality of teaching.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made in improving success rates for learners?

Reasonable progress

Although achievement rates were generally around national rates at the previous inspection, retention rates were a concern. In addition, the college made insufficient use of value-added data. There were also some disparities in the performance of different groups and learners were not always set challenging targets for achievement.

Since then, senior managers have improved the collection and sharing of information on students' attendance and progress. This enables staff to intervene promptly, before students are at risk of falling behind or leaving. Thus far in 2010/11, the retention rate on long courses is just above the rate at a comparable point in 2009/10. Attendance has improved. The college has placed greater emphasis on setting challenging targets for students to improve high-grade achievements and has begun to make better use of value-added data. Projected achievement rates, based on work already assessed for students' overall awards, are higher than in previous years. Action to tackle the underperformance of some groups has improved the retention of these students. However, in the past improvements have been fragile, and these good indicators of improvement have yet to be confirmed in validated success rates or sustained over a period of time.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in taking action to improve the quality of teaching and learning?

Significant progress

At the previous inspection, too many lessons were no better than satisfactory; a view shared by the college in its self-assessment. Although its lesson observation system was becoming increasingly effective as a means of improving the quality of teaching and learning, there were inconsistencies in its use and the quality of resulting feedback.

Since then, senior managers have implemented clear plans for improving teaching and learning. The observation programme is now more consistently applied by observers. Observation reports are thorough, evaluative and lead to clear action plans for teachers' development and whole-college training. The college gives teachers good support and professional development to improve their practice. Teaching and learning managers are effective in identifying and sharing good practice across the college.

The college judges that the quality of its teaching and learning has improved. During the weeks of planned observations, 83% of lessons were good or outstanding. The college recognises that it now needs to sustain this good performance throughout the academic year. Curriculum enrichment, which was an area for improvement at the previous inspection, has improved considerably; it is used well to develop

students' understanding of equality and diversity. However, as yet, not all teachers make sufficient use of the curriculum to improve this understanding.

What progress has the college made to improve the quality of accommodation and access for people with restricted mobility at the Broadwater site? Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection, accommodation at the college's Broadwater site was of poor quality and outdated. People with restricted mobility needed assistance to use the premises. Plans for the rebuilding of the site had been put on hold.

Following the inspection, the senior leadership team carried out a full curriculum review and prepared new plans to develop the Broadwater site into a centre for education and training for learners aged 14 to 19. The first stage of that plan is now under way with the building of centres for hairdressing and beauty and 14 to 16 provision. The college has provided clear guidance to architects to ensure that the building will meet the needs of learners and the curriculum effectively, and will provide better access to the premises. The building is due to be completed in October 2011. In the meantime, the college has improved accessibility for learners with mobility problems, according to their individual needs. However, a small minority of students with learning difficulties or disabilities still need additional help to access their art classes.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in updating its administrative records for safeguarding and staff training? Significant progress

At the previous inspection, the college had been slow to record its safeguarding checks on a number of recently-appointed staff and records of safeguarding training were incomplete. Since then, managers have improved the college's systems for carrying out and recording safeguarding checks. Recruitment staff carry out Criminal Records Bureau and other checks as soon as staff and governors are appointed and record all statutory details promptly on the single central register. Managers have detailed plans for safeguarding training and their records of staff training are up to date. All staff have been, or are about to be, given suitable safeguarding training. This includes additional training for senior managers and staff who work with students aged 14 to 16. All college managers take extended training, to advanced level, in safeguarding. The college's safeguarding plan includes arrangements for updating staff every two years. Clear security and critical incident procedures are in place. Students are well informed about what to do if any incidents arise. In a recent student survey, less than 1% of students responded negatively to the question about feeling safe in the college. The safeguarding team provides regular reports to senior managers and to the governing body.

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