

MidKent College

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

MidKent College is a large general further education college with two main sites. The new campus in Gillingham opened in September 2009 and serves the towns in Medway, which is a unitary authority. The second campus is situated in Maidstone, the county town of Kent. Both sites serve areas of deprivation and more prosperous parts of the region. The college offers courses in all subject areas, along with a substantial employer-responsive programme which includes engineering and construction training at the Royal School of Military Engineering in Chatham. In 2009/10, 10,556 students took courses at the college, of whom 5,353 were aged 16 to 18 and 5,203 were adults.

At the college's last inspection in May 2009, overall effectiveness, leadership and management, achievement and standards and quality of provision were judged to be good. Capacity to improve was judged to be outstanding. Of the six subject areas inspected, one was graded as outstanding (hairdressing and beauty therapy), three as good (health, public services and care; engineering; business, administration and law) and two as satisfactory (construction; literacy, numeracy and key skills). This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit. As well as incorporating the areas for improvement noted at the previous inspection, they include accommodation and resources following the new build and teaching and learning, which were areas of concern in the college's self-assessment report for 2009/10.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in ensuring that self-assessment and quality improvement systems have led to improvement across the college in 2010/11?

Significant progress

The college has used its thorough and well-planned self-assessment process and most of its quality improvement systems very effectively to bring about considerable improvements for students in 2010/11. The two most recent self-assessment reports for 2009/10 and 2010/11, the latter currently in draft form, are clear and honest in identifying both strengths and areas of concern that have the most impact on students' experiences. A culture of critical self-evaluation exists across the college and all managers and staff are acutely aware of the college's strengths, what needs to improve and the reasons for the satisfactory performance last year. The college has renewed its strong focus on what it terms its core activities during 2010/11, concentrating most of its efforts successfully on improvements in retention, behaviour and attendance, raising the proportion of good or better teaching and learning, and better assessment support for students. Very effective actions have been taken through new appointments and capacity building to improve provision in under-performing faculties, to strengthen most of the quality improvement processes across the college and to implement new initiatives to support staff. Quality

improvement processes now focus more rigorously on individual course and student performance, although there remain some further refinements to be made to observations of teaching and learning.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made in improving success rates following decreases in 2008/09? In particular, those for 16- to 18-year-olds on advanced courses which were below average at the last inspection?

Reasonable progress

The previous inspection judged outcomes for students to be good, but success rates for those aged 16 to 18 on advanced courses were an area of concern. Following the inspection in May 2009, success rates for 2008/09 fell sharply. Over the ensuing two years, the college has made reasonable progress to improve its performance. Success rates were satisfactory in 2009/10. Managers willingly identify that the divestment of the previous college sites and the opening of the new campus in September 2009 affected performance adversely for a number of reasons during the subsequent year and also the latter part of 2008/09. These factors affected retention rates on long courses in particular, which declined in 2009/10 to be below the national average. Success rates on long courses improved by two percentage points overall through a rise in achievement of six percentage points, but were still just below the national average. The college did not make any progress at all in improving success rates on advanced courses in 2009/10. Significant rises did take place in success rates for short courses and for employer-responsive programmes during 2009/10, all of which were satisfactory. In 2010/11, retention on long courses at all levels has improved significantly and the college is very confident that its accurate forecasting demonstrates that success rates will also show a dramatic improvement. Already this year, employer-responsive success rates are very high.

How well has the college improved the progress made by students on GCE A-level and BTEC programmes?

Reasonable progress

The previous inspection judged that students on GCE A-level and BTEC programmes do not make good progress. The college's progress in rectifying this area of concern has been variable, but overall it is reasonable. In 2008/09, the progress made by AS-level and A-level students, as measured by value-added scores, was well below national averages. In 2009/10, following improved student tracking, value-added scores improved and were above national averages. Current in-year retention and target-setting data show that these improvements have continued into 2010/11 and are likely to lead to further improvements in the progress that students make.

The situation as regards BTEC students is not so positive. Valued-added scores for these students have been below national averages for the last three years. Students on BTEC National Diplomas, in particular, make poor progress based on prior attainment. Managers and teachers are very aware of this issue and have put in place strategies to improve retention and to raise standards. Current in-year data for

2010/11 show that the college can be cautiously optimistic regarding likely outcomes for BTEC students this year.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in putting in place arrangements to improve the quality of teaching and learning?

Reasonable progress

At the time of the previous inspection, teaching and learning were good, but the college subsequently identified in its 2009/10 self-assessment report that there was not enough good or better teaching in some faculties. The college has now taken decisive steps to improve this situation and judges that just under 75% of its teaching and learning is good or better in 2010/11. These actions have included unannounced lesson observations and a proportionate approach to observing classes in different parts of the college based on performance. The college has also implemented a number of successful initiatives to provide a more supportive culture in which to develop teachers' skills, including the appointment of teacher coaches and the development of innovative teaching resource rooms. Teachers value this support highly and can identify the positive effect it has on their classroom practice.

Some lesson observations focus too much on teaching strategies and not enough on the skills or knowledge that students acquire. Continuous professional development and coaching support some teachers well with identified action points arising from some observations, but it is not always clear how heads of faculty follow up other areas of development during their subsequent short visits to classes in the way that the college envisages. In some cases, issues identified during classroom observations do not lead to any sufficiently clear action points.

What progress has been made in improving target setting in individual learning plans and the rigour of students' reviews?

Significant progress

Target setting and reviews of students' progress were key areas for improvement at the last inspection and both of these aspects of the provision have improved significantly. A great deal of very effective work has taken place to bring together student data which were formerly recorded in various ways into one electronic learning plan. The new system, in place from September 2010, collects these data and displays them in a single electronic location for each student on the college intranet. Teachers and students are very enthused about the new plans and the latter find the clear visual displays of their attendance, subject reports and target grades very motivational. Students' attendance, retention and progress have all improved in 2010/11.

The best learning plans contain measurable and specific targets that clearly relate to issues identified through student reviews, subject reports or attendance monitoring. However, a significant minority of the plans scrutinised during this visit contained general targets that did not focus precisely enough on what students had to do to improve their performance or their skills and knowledge. College managers are

aware of this issue and forthcoming staff training is aimed at helping staff to encourage students to set more meaningful targets.

How much progress has been made in implementing functional skills to replace key skills, some of which were performing below national averages at the last inspection?

Significant progress

Key skills attainment was an area of concern at the last inspection and the college has made significant progress in replacing them with functional skills, which are performing well. Success rates for the large number of students taking functional skills have improved significantly over the last two years from 43% to 61% in 2009/10 and are just below the national average. The college is very committed to ensuring that functional skills are a meaningful part of students' courses. Considerable staff development has taken place since the previous inspection to bring this commitment to fruition and functional skills are now well integrated with subject-specific teaching across the college. Where necessary, specialist teachers have helped particular curriculum teams to develop strategies for the teaching of functional skills in vocational contexts. Teachers are very positive about these developments and speak enthusiastically about the way in which they are able to teach functional skills within their subject areas.

Leadership and management

How much progress has the college made in improving accommodation and resources which were identified as areas of improvement by college managers at the last inspection?

Significant progress

Accommodation and resources have improved significantly since the previous inspection. The new campus in Gillingham, opened in September 2009, sends out a strong message to the local community regarding the importance of further education in the continued regeneration of the Medway area. The campus is spacious and welcoming and is creative in its use of space to encourage a learning environment, for example through the use of teachers' resource rooms and curriculum-specific learning resource areas. All classrooms have excellent multi-media facilities and curriculum areas are very well resourced, reflecting, or even exceeding in some cases, current industry standards. Public areas and the various catering outlets are welcoming and attractive. Student satisfaction surveys show a significant improvement regarding all aspects of resources at the new campus over the last year, although feedback regarding the Maidstone site is more static. Overall, students rate all aspects of resources at both sites as better than satisfactory and, in most cases, as good. Plans are now well advanced to redevelop the Maidstone campus, involving refurbishment of the current accommodation, collaboration with local secondary schools and the development of a sports complex.

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