

Southport College

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Southport College was formed in 1983 through a merger of the School of Arts and Southport Technical College. The college offers programmes at its main site near Southport town centre, at a centre in Formby and through franchised training in community sites. Courses are offered in all subject areas with the majority of learners working towards vocational qualifications. The college offers programmes for 14 to 16 year old learners including Diplomas in society, health and development, hairdressing and beauty therapy studies, and engineering. A work-based learning department manages the college's employer-responsive provision which includes short courses, Train to Gain, apprenticeships and commercial training. The College has just retained its accreditation for Part A of the Total Quality Standard and was successful in obtaining matrix accreditation in 2009.

The college was inspected in November 2007. The inspection judged overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision, leadership and management, and equality of opportunity as good. Health, care and public services provision was judged outstanding. Information and communication technology, and arts, media and publishing were judged good. Construction, engineering, and foundations for learning and life were judged satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during the monitoring visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has Southport College made in improving quality assurance processes, self-assessment and development planning to improve provision?

Reasonable progress

Since the last monitoring visit the college has revised the course review process. The processes used to collect learners' evaluations of their programmes are improved and incorporated better within the course reviews. All staff participate in the self-assessment process. The use of management information has continued to improve. Staff now receive monthly attendance and retention reports so that they can identify and respond to issues sooner. Peer reference groups moderate the self-assessment reports and staff teams and managers robustly and frequently monitor the implementation of improvement action plans.

The observation of teaching and learning process has been developed and improved. All teachers are observed annually. In addition, a range of 'walk through' observations meets specific needs or themes. Teaching and learning mentors are allocated to each subject area and provide teachers with good support. Teacher and curriculum leader appraisal includes a review of performance and focuses well on the holistic development needs of these staff. However, the appraisal records do not

make it clear how extensively course success data are used in evaluating and setting their appraisal targets.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made in improving success rates, particularly for 16 to 18 year olds and short courses? **Reasonable progress**

At the last inspection success rates for 16 to 18 year olds were considerably lower than adult rates. Recognising low retention as the major factor, the college has effectively implemented a number of improvement strategies. A thorough review of the college's recruitment processes has resulted in clearer course information. Individual pre-course interviews for learners on all full-time and the majority of part-time programmes are now standard. Learners have a better understanding of the programmes and the commitment required of them. Learners attribute their ongoing success to improved and now clear assignment briefs and the very good support provided by teachers and pastoral tutors.

Long-course success rates for 16 to 18 year old learners have improved consistently at all levels. The improvement has been significantly faster than the national rate for intermediate and advanced programmes. Current rates at all levels either match or are above national averages. The improvement for short courses has been slower but retention rates in the current year have improved considerably. Conversely, although adult success rates remain above national rates, long-course success rates have declined slightly on foundation and intermediate programmes and improved on advanced programmes. The college has consolidated adult provision into one department in order to focus on the particular needs of these learners, but it is too soon to judge the impact. A full review of the Train to Gain provision, supported by effective interventions, has improved the programme's success rates.

How much better are managers and staff monitoring learners' progress and challenging and supporting them to attain high grades? **Reasonable progress**

Although not an issue at the last inspection, the college self-assessment recognises the achievement of high grades and the progress learners make in relation to their attainment at the start of their programmes are areas for improvement. Staff development and a stronger focus on monitoring learners' progress have raised staff awareness of the need to set suitably challenging target grades and then help learners achieve them. Aspirational targets are now more visible on individual learning plans, assignment front sheets and the electronic tutorial system. In most departments assignment schedules now include re-submission dates. Course teams now place a higher priority on examination preparation sessions and on attendance at additional workshops to improve assignment work, mathematics and English.

Pastoral tutors are quick to provide additional support to learners who achieve lower grades than expected. Case conferences are convened with specialist staff from learner services to support learners with complex needs. The college has recently extended the electronic tutorial system to include a 'mark book', which records each learner's aspirational grades, their actual grades as they achieve them and their final predicted grades based on work already completed. The system is available to staff, learners and parents and is in the final stages of implementation across all departments.

Quality of provision

How successfully has the college extended and embedded the range of enrichment activities and how effectively have learners been involved in planning and evaluating the activities?

Reasonable progress

The college has consolidated its enrichment arrangements since the last monitoring visit. All course teams plan their vocational enrichment at the commencement of the year and progress against the plans is monitored monthly by heads of department. The college now has a central team of staff headed by a senior manager which plans the college-wide enrichment programmes. All enrichment plans make good use of learner surveys and suggestions from learner forums and focus groups. The college uses a good range of strategies to promote enrichment, and interesting activities are regularly featured in the college magazine.

The enrichment team meets regularly and senior managers receive reports on attendance and the popularity of activities. The provision takes good account of the need to promote learners' personal development, health and well-being. Learners use the activities well to inform their personal statements and to improve their skills. Some projects are appropriately linked to the needs of the local community and to regional regeneration. However, attendance on some college-wide activities is spasmodic and some of the planned cross-college activities are not sufficiently popular to be viable. Learners from many departments are successfully involved in enterprise projects with secondary and primary schools. Arts and media learners, identified as having too few enrichment activities at the last inspection, now have a varied and meaningful programme of activities.

How successfully has the college improved its partnership working with employers and extended placement opportunities for learners?

Significant progress

The college has addressed all of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection with respect to partnership working with employers. The college engages with significantly more employers across all curriculum areas. Managers analyse these relationships thoroughly to identify the benefits and costs. Improved employer

collaboration has resulted in an increase in apprentice numbers, a wider range of subject areas offered and more progression opportunities for learners. The college uses the views of employers appropriately in planning and reviewing provision. Employers play a much more active role in college activities such as attending specific forums, speaking at events and delivering 'master' classes, as well as training and updating college staff. The college is responsive to the needs of employers and adaptable in the way it arranges its provision. It makes good use of local contacts and its membership of local groups to enhance its already productive and good employer relationships.

The opportunities for learners to experience an effective and meaningful work placement have also improved substantially. Over the last three years the number of placements each year has increased across the whole college. All placement venues are risk assessed appropriately prior to the placement starting. The college runs a very successful 'work skills' course for 350 learners, achieving a high success rate of 92%.

Leadership and management

How effectively has the college improved the promotion of learner safety through the implementation of safeguarding policies and practice?

Significant progress

The college has made significant progress in implementing and promoting safeguarding policies and practice. A detailed policy and a range of written supporting procedures cover all statutory requirements. All staff undertake mandatory training in safeguarding awareness and staff in key roles access higher-level training. Good links are in place with local safeguarding boards. The college has a named governor who attends safeguarding committee meetings. This committee is very active and makes good use of external members to access up-to-date information and practice. All governors have received training. The college promotes safeguarding very well around the college premises and on the virtual learning environment. All college computers carry the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) link and staff have received CEOP training. Safeguarding is promoted exceptionally well and the college safeguarding support team now deals effectively with an increasing number of referrals and other identified issues.

A high proportion of learners indicate they feel safe. Security staff are visible around the college and learners, visitors and staff are required to wear personal identification. Both arrangements contribute very effectively to onsite safety. Learners receive training on the safe use of social networking sites. Safeguarding posters and other displays are highly visible around the college and good use is made of the college virtual learning environment to promote safety.

How successfully has the college improved the setting of course performance targets and implemented strategies to identify and remedy underperformance?**Reasonable progress**

The college has a good range of strategies to manage the performance of courses and departments. Well-considered and appropriately challenging course performance targets are set annually. Progress against these targets is closely monitored at monthly meetings at course, department and senior manager levels. Course teams review their programmes five times each year. At monthly boards of study meetings the heads of department and curriculum leaders monitor each course against the key performance indicators. A performance management group convenes monthly to review the college-wide position.

Declining retention, consistently low success rates and self-assessment grades that are consistently no better than satisfactory instigate a full-course evaluation by a specialist team of staff. The team completes a full audit of all documentation, meets with staff and students and completes lesson observations. The resulting report includes detailed actions for improvement. Those actions linked to non-compliance with college requirements are clear and measurable. However, actions linked to quality improvement, such as teaching and learning, are insufficiently measurable. A review of the college's foundations for learning provision has resulted in a new course structure and closer partnership working with specialist schools. In those departments where the college is monitoring previously low retention or achievement in-year data indicate improvement.

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