

West of England College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent specialist college

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

The West of England College is an independent specialist residential college for learners with sight loss and complex needs. In recent years the college has recruited many more learners with varied and complex needs. It is situated in 16 acres of land in the city of Exeter. The college provides further education and independence training for young people aged 19 to 25. At the previous inspection, in April 2008, all aspects of the college were judged to be good.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college made in capturing the views of learners to help inform the quality-improvement arrangements and the self-assessment process?	Significant progress
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Learners attend all of the quality committees and have done so for two years. The work from the quality committees feeds directly into the self-assessment process and report. There are two learners as a minimum on each committee and the college reports that their involvement has had a significant impact on developments across the whole establishment. Inspectors met one of the learners who was able to explain what changes had taken place due to learner involvement in the development of the college. The most significant change is the development of the learners' independent living skills programme, which has been given a much higher profile. Learners identified that they felt they did not have enough freedom and wanted to be much more independent. The college recognised that much learning takes place outside the teaching day and has developed the independent living skills programme to cover the 24-hour curriculum. Roll out of the programme is planned for September 2011.

Outcomes for learners

How well have learners achieved since the last inspection? Have learners made sufficient progress in moving on to further education and training and into independent and supported living since the last inspection?	Reasonable progress
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Learners continue to achieve well in accredited learning. Data are detailed and thoroughly analysed in terms of how well different groups of learners achieve, but there is very little information on how well learners make progress in relation to their various starting points.

There is some poor achievement of individual learning plan (ILP) targets for entry level 3 learners. Target setting has not been consistently good, but senior managers hope this will improve with the development of centrally-set targets and more regular monitoring of the targets through the management information system.

The college is aware of the destinations of all learners. Fifteen learners left the college in 2009/10. Ten went into supported living or residential care, which was the planned destination for seven of the learners. Staff do not track the learners once they have left the college so are not aware if those in supported living have any meaningful daytime employment. This is the first year where no learners have progressed to further education (FE), which is a significant drop since 2006/7 when 13 learners went into FE, but reflects their changing needs. Two learners went into voluntary or paid employment and two left for health reasons.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in developing its e-learning platform and what impact has it had on improving the sharing of good practice?

Reasonable progress

The college is making reasonable progress in developing the e-learning platform. The work was slightly delayed while the college investigated and considered different systems. The aim is to improve the efficiency of information and communication technology (ICT) across the whole of the college and, at the same time, improve staff skills in the use of ICT so they are confident in using the new system. It is planned that by September 2011 there will be a group of ICT champions who will disseminate and promote the use of the new system among teachers. A pilot group of learners is developing its own pages, including creating a learner voice page. A staff intranet is planned for the sharing of good practice.

What progress has been made in developing sufficiently detailed work experience reports in order to help learners to evaluate how successful they have been?

Reasonable progress

The previous monitoring visit judged some records of work experience to be insufficiently detailed, failing to provide learners with clear criteria to easily evaluate how successful they have been. Work experience records are now more structured and individualised, concentrating on the experience of learners, the skills acquired and the barriers encountered by the learner or employers. Learners have a greater role in selecting and planning their placements and links to the college-based curriculum are clearer and coherent. The range and scope of work experience have improved, as has the linking of employability to the college curriculum. The college and employers derive mutual benefit from the partnerships developed. Employers now have a better understanding of the needs and abilities of learners through improved pre-placement communication with support staff. The appointment of a specialist advice and guidance worker supports learners in making their choices and influences the vocational curriculum. Learners are not currently given a job description or person specification related to their placement before they start work experience that makes clear the skills and competencies required to be successful. However, learners are clear about what is expected of them and what they need to do to improve.

Leadership and management

How successful has the college been in seeking employers' views about the college as a whole and what has been the impact?

Reasonable progress

Communication between employers and college staff is improving and is now good in most instances. A formal checklist, introduced in November 2010, asks employers to grade the main processes related to work experience. The responses are overwhelmingly positive but are not currently used as a baseline to measure further improvements or clearly influence quality improvement activities. More valuable are the qualitative statements included in the replies, particularly where employers identify improvements required or comment on less effective aspects of the experience. A summary of employers' responses is presented to senior managers and included in the self-assessment report, but the information is not formally used to set further quality-improvement targets. Where individual concerns are identified the college takes appropriate and timely action. Staff supporting learners in the workplace are not formally involved in the collection of employer views, although they are often well placed and have the appropriate relationship with employers to contribute to the process.

How successful has the college been in actively involving learners in the planning and reviewing of their learning, and how well are senior and middle managers evaluating the effectiveness of the new procedures?

Reasonable progress

The college's strategic decision to actively involve learners in the review process has started to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of the weekly team meetings. Learners now lead their reviews and play a more effective role in planning and evaluating their own learning. Learners are well prepared by their key workers for meetings, and this gradually develops their confidence in, and understanding of, the process. Advocacy skills are well developed and team members are now more sensitive to the needs of participants. The annual review process is now learner centred and the recently-devised specialist outcomes for learners have the potential to improve this process further. The strong focus on developing self-awareness, self-management, socialisation and emotional resilience is beginning to be reflected to a greater extent in curriculum activities and individual planning. The impact of this greater involvement of learners has not yet been fully evaluated by senior and middle managers, but there are some good examples of individual learners becoming more assertive and having greater control of their experiences at college and beyond.

Areas identified by the college

Neuroscience

The college has now moved to a neuroscience-based model of delivery to help improve sight and the use of sight in learners with visual impairment (VI). This is a significant move for the college as it entails having to develop radical new ways of

working. The Principal and other staff have been to centres in America to find out more about the neuroscience approach to working with learners with VI. Staff from centres in Australia have been twice to the college to train staff in the use of neuroscience techniques. Inspectors were able to observe a session where a learner was carrying out activities to encourage her to scan across a space more widely, thus encouraging her to use more of her visual skills. The impact of this model of delivery is that learners should be able to make better use of the sight they have.

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