

Milton Keynes College

Reinspection monitoring visit report

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REINSPECTION MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Milton Keynes College is a large general further education college on three sites in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire. Over 60% of learners in learner-responsive provision at the college are aged 16 to 18. Some 55% of these study courses at advanced level, most of which are vocational courses. The college works with around 600 employers through a combination of apprenticeships, Train to Gain, professional qualifications and commercial training. The city has areas of severe economic deprivation, which are among the most deprived 10% of all areas in England.

At the previous inspection, in March 2011, the overall effectiveness of provision was satisfactory, as were outcomes for learners, the quality of provision, leadership and management, and the capacity to improve. Safeguarding arrangements and the promotion of equality and diversity were good. Provision in hairdressing and beauty therapy was good, while that in uniformed public services, visual arts and media, and business, administration and law was satisfactory. Provision in science and mathematics was inadequate. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What is the extent of progress in improving quality assurance, to tackle weaknesses noted at the previous inspection?

Reasonable progress

The college has made a good start in improving the rigour, range and consistency of quality assurance. It has significantly changed its management structures to place the learners' success and teaching and learning at the centre of its activities. A helpful external review of quality improvement strategies has supported change. Many of the actions for improvement it suggested are being implemented.

The new structures, substantially operational since September, emphasise quality improvement through a 'back to basics' approach to teaching and learning and wider care of learners. These help promote greater team work and the sharing of good practice. Enhanced staff development activities support staff in their new roles.

The priority to improve quality is reflected in the organisation and focus of the newly created departments. Departmental leadership teams now include leading teachers and programme managers with a particular brief for quality monitoring and improvement. Leading teachers concentrate exclusively on promoting better teaching and learning and have just started meeting together to share and develop their practices. Programme managers review data about learners' progress weekly to ensure prompt action to support learners at risk of underachievement.

Managers are planning more effectively for improvement by ensuring a sharper focus on agreed priorities and more detailed strategies to bring about the necessary changes.

Outcomes for learners

What progress is being made in improving learners' outcomes since the previous inspection?

Reasonable progress

Outcomes for learners were satisfactory at the previous inspection, but success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 studying at advanced levels were consistently below national averages, as a result of low pass rates on AS-level courses. Outcomes were particularly poor in science and mathematics.

College data show that success, retention and pass rates for 2010/11 will be around those for 2009/10, and in line with the most recent national averages for similar colleges. The college has significantly improved success rates in 2010/11 for GCE A-level courses, including those for AS level. Overall success rates for AS level increased by nine percentage points to 65%, owing to much improved pass rates, which are now at the national average.

Poorer performance is still evident for learners aged 16 to 18 on advanced level courses, compared to learners aged 19 or over, largely because of lower retention. However, data on learners' retention for 2011/12 so far indicate significant improvement over the same period in 2010/11, especially for advanced-level long courses.

The college is making good progress in furthering the opportunities of its learners by giving added emphasis to the improvement of their work and employability skills.

Quality of provision

What progress is being made with improving the sharing of good practice in teaching and learning?

Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection the college has prioritised the improvement of teaching and learning. The annual professional development day, in the summer term, was extended to various activities across three weeks. Many activities tackled recommendations from the inspection. The large majority of teachers attended, with 161 attending a practical session on 'engaging with teaching and learning' including the sharing of best practice in teaching.

Recent changes in management structures aim to support improvements in teaching and learning. For example, the introduction of the leading teacher role provides a specific focus on supporting improvements in teaching. Leading teachers meet monthly to share good practice and the outcomes of 'learning walks' and other interventions. Early indications are that the role is well understood and appreciated by teachers.

Learning walks, which were trialled in the previous academic year, have been extended to the whole college since September 2011. They are often based on themes, for example 'starter activities', with the explicit aim of identifying and sharing good practice. To date, nearly 50 have been carried out this year. Departments are in the early stages of collating and disseminating the findings to their teams. The college has developed a bank of teaching resources, which are checked by quality managers to ensure that they meet quality standards. Teachers are beginning to use the bank to extend and enhance their teaching practice.

What progress is being made to further the opportunities for the use of information and learning technologies (ILT) in learning, including for science and mathematics? **Reasonable progress**

Since the previous inspection the college has continued to upgrade its computer networks and equipment, with the replacement of laptop and personal computers. The majority of teaching areas have access to 'smart boards' or digital projectors. The college is also upgrading its virtual learning environment (VLE) to increase its capacity for mobile media. It has purchased tablet computers to support learning in tutorials. In recent months, teachers have received training in the use of the VLE as an interactive tool. Many teachers have attended sessions related to the use of ILT as part of the college's professional development training. The new construction and engineering centre is well equipped with up-to-date, industry-standard technology which supports the use of ILT well.

The use of ILT by teachers in lessons varies in its effectiveness. Teachers do not always use interactive whiteboards to their full potential. Learners' opportunities and experiences of using the VLE as a learning aid are mixed in quality. Learners are disappointed that while teachers for some of their subjects fully use and promote the use of ILT others use it little. The science and mathematics department is making a proportionately significant contribution to the use of the VLE and of ILT to support learning.

What progress is being made with improving the quality of target setting for learners, including the contribution of individual learning plans and tutorials? **Reasonable progress**

Although assessment was satisfactory at the previous inspection, individual learning plans and progress reviews were poorly used in most curriculum areas and the quality of tutorials was inconsistent.

The college very promptly acted upon these findings. Significant investment has allowed the introduction of an IT system for electronic individual learning plans and learners' assessment. The college has done well to implement new arrangements for all full-time learners from September 2011. Learners and teachers now have a central and reliable resource to help chart and monitor progress and to set meaningful short- and long-term targets.

Tutorial provision has been redesigned, with much greater emphasis on learners' academic progress and target setting. Tutors and learners have more focused

discussions and are able to agree more appropriate targets, supported by their common knowledge of learners' performance. Learners speak very positively about improvements to target setting, using the new individual learning plans, but in some areas of work, such as the visual and performing arts, learners comment that they use individual learning plans little and that tutorials do not focus on target setting.

The college judges that seven of its nine departments have begun to use the new plans effectively, with two departments further behind in their use of the system. The quality team continues to support the introduction of the plans in these two departments. The new arrangements are being piloted for one subject area of work-based learning apprenticeships, before fully implementing them for all apprenticeships.

The college has well-conceived plans, charting actions and initiatives over the remainder of the academic year, for the further development of assessment planning and tracking.

Leadership and management

What progress is being made to improve the quality of provision in science and mathematics?

Reasonable progress

The success rates in AS subjects improved markedly in 2010/11 and were slightly below the national averages. The proportion of high grades also improved markedly, to around the national average. In general, low retention continues to affect AS-level outcomes and low pass rates A-level outcomes. The proportion of students achieving A* to C pass grades in GCSEs has declined in the last three years and is below the national averages. In most subjects, learners achieve in line with their expectations, based on their prior attainment, although in AS-level chemistry and A-level mathematics learners achieved better than expectations.

At the time of the previous inspection, entry requirements for science and mathematics had been raised, with positive impact on subsequent AS-level success rates. In the current year, the department has additionally ensured that potential science learners are advised by teachers about their choice of subjects. Withdrawals at this point in the year, compared to the same point last year, are significantly lower and early transfers to other courses have decreased.

The department has improved its tutorial arrangements, to allow for a greater focus on academic support, by aligning tutor groups to subject rather than year of study, allowing for subject-focused support. It is too early to gauge what impact this change will have on learners' progress.

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