

Hereford College of Arts

Reinspection monitoring visit report

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REINSPECTION MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Hereford College of Arts is a small specialist arts college located in the city of Hereford. It is one of three further education colleges in the city and offers further and higher education provision. The majority of learners are on advanced-level courses. In addition, the college provides learning opportunities for a small number of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

In 2010/11, the college had 474 learners on full-time courses of which 396 were aged 16 to 18 and 78 were adults. A further 21 part-time learners were enrolled on courses of which three were aged 16 to 18 and 18 were adults. The large majority of these learners were on visual arts courses and most were from White British backgrounds. Most learners are recruited from Herefordshire or Worcestershire. The college's mission is 'to provide outstanding education and employability in the creative arts'.

The college was last inspected in March 2011 and was judged inadequate. Of the two subjects inspected, performing arts was graded as inadequate and visual arts as satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has been made in improving quality assurance arrangements, self-assessment and the use of action plans to drive improvement, particularly the use of targets and key performance indicators?

Reasonable progress

A number of major improvements in quality assurance arrangements, such as instigating regular course reviews following a prescribed format and pre-populated with accurate data, are proving effective. For example, through course reviews, tutors are evaluating aspects of courses and learners' progress much more rigorously. However, the increased rigour in the lesson observation process is relatively new and not yet well established. Some records, such as individual learning plans, are not routinely audited by managers and the quality varies.

Self-assessment identifies the main strengths and areas for improvement, uses data at course level well and is mostly self-critical. However, the use of summary data, showing headline performance and trends, to support judgements is limited. Some other analyses are not fully developed: the evaluation of progression is not comprehensive; strengths claimed in learners' wider outcomes are not well supported by quantitative data and the evaluation of value-added measures, basic skills development and employability skills is limited.

Key performance indicators are in place as part of the strategic plan. Linked headline success rate targets are being developed for the first time, based on the challenging and comprehensive targets that have been set at course level. The post-inspection action plan is detailed and monitored closely. Progress in completing actions is mostly on target. The quality improvement plans that arise out of self-assessment both at whole college and curriculum area levels are in the process of being refined to ensure that they are sufficiently detailed and include clear targets that link to those already established in other plans.

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has been made in improving learners' retention, attendance, attainment and progress?

Reasonable progress

Based on college data for 2010/11, retention rates have increased markedly to be broadly average, reversing the previous decline. In-year data for courses of a two-year duration due to be completed in 2012 indicate that a higher percentage of learners have been retained in two of the three courses offered. Pass rates, including high grade passes, remain high. The long course success rate for 2010/11 is above average, a notable improvement compared to success rates in 2009/10. Comparison of predicted grades and final results indicate that often around half of learners make better than expected progress. The standard of learners' work remains high.

Attendance in 2010/11 was broadly satisfactory, similar to the rates reported at inspection. However, concerted work to emphasise the importance of attendance, including a challenging college-wide target, has resulted in increased attendance in 2011/12, albeit at a very early stage in the academic year. Learners are highly aware of the need to have full attendance. The increased focus on attendance and punctuality is supported by effective recording systems. Courses with lower than expected attendance are already being monitored closely and actions taken very promptly.

Attainment by learners of wider key skills is good. More emphasis on the development of literacy and numeracy skills is evident. Pre-entry coursework for music students included written work and the curriculum has been changed to increase functional skills provision, for example. However, few learners achieve accredited qualifications in literacy and numeracy skills.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made in improving provision in performing arts? Reasonable progress

In 2010/11, the success rate on the advanced-level performing arts course increased markedly to be well above average. In contrast, success rates on the intermediate-level performing arts course and the advanced-level music course were low. In the current year, a considerable improvement is evident in the retention of learners on year two of the advanced-level music course; however, this is not the case for the performing arts cohort because of low retention in year one. The intermediate course is not being run in 2011/12 due to low numbers of applicants. Although early in the term, attendance rates are much higher than at the same point last year. A code of professional conduct is now emphasised to all learners at induction. In the large majority of lessons teachers promote this well, with a good response from learners, although in a few there is insufficient emphasis on professional practice. Standards of work seen by inspectors were high.

As part of the drive to increase retention, improvements to initial advice and guidance, including a more rigorous audition and interview process, are proving highly successful in ensuring that learners are placed on the right course. The number of learners who have withdrawn or transferred from courses has reduced significantly. Learners spoken to during the monitoring visit reported notable improvements in individual tutorials, the course structure and timetabling. They welcomed the emphasis on listening to their views.

The new management arrangements have encouraged closer collaboration and sharing of good practice between subject teams. While most aspects of quality assurance have improved and are more rigorously applied, the moderation of lesson observations is not yet sufficiently robust. Departmental action plans vary in detail. In a few cases, improvement targets and success criteria are not precise enough to help measure the progress and impact of actions.

How much progress has been made in improving the arrangements for the provision of additional learning support? Reasonable progress

The arrangements for additional learning support are now more cohesive. All learners meet additional learning support staff at interview. The effectiveness of initial assessment has improved but the college recognises that more work is required to ensure that initial assessment of numeracy skills is more thorough. Initial assessment information is not always used or recorded consistently in individual learning plans to help inform learners' targets.

It is now mandatory for learners who are identified as needing additional support to take it up as part of their learner agreement. The success rates of learners who

received additional leaning support in 2010/11 improved notably compared to the previous year. Attendance at support sessions has increased in the current year. Several support initiatives have proved very effective. A short 'Study Plus' initiative in the summer term of 2011 helped 34 learners at risk of not achieving their qualification, resulting in almost all successfully achieving their qualification within the expected timescale. Learners' views about the quality of support are now sought on a systematic basis.

How much progress has been made in improving initial advice, guidance and on-course support for learners?

Significant progress

Since the inspection, significant improvements have been made to the initial advice and guidance received by learners. Pre-course information has been reviewed and is clear, detailed and ensures that learners, parents and carers are fully informed about the demands of courses. Entry requirements have been appropriately revised while still supporting an inclusive application policy. The interview and audition arrangements have been formalised and strengthened. First year learners speak positively about the rigour of the interview process and are highly aware of the challenge their study will entail. The number of withdrawals in the first six weeks of courses has reduced considerably in 2011/12.

In the early stages of courses, a number of improvements have been made which ensure that learners receive appropriate support from the start of their study. Early assessment of learners' capabilities is comprehensive, through pre-entry coursework, undertaking introductory qualifications and much improved initial assessment of their literacy skills. From an early stage, risk registers, based on a range of indicators including learners' prior attainment and attendance and punctuality records, are used extensively and checked fortnightly. This ensures that learners at risk of underperformance are clearly and promptly identified and that support is provided quickly.

Leadership and management

To what extent have governors increased the degree to which they hold the college to account and ensured that they fulfil their statutory duties?

Reasonable progress

Governors are determined in their efforts to improve the quality of learners' experience at the college. They have reviewed their performance and established various new approaches to ensure that they not only continue to support the college but also provide a high level of challenge to ensure that improvements take place. They have accurately identified several training needs. Revisions to the range and frequency of learners' performance reports received by governors are appropriate and mean that governors are more able to scrutinise data and to challenge managers accordingly. However, governors do not always consider learners' performance at a headline level alongside their detailed scrutiny of course level data,

thus limiting their oversight of trends over time and comparisons with national averages. Governors set a high target for learners' attendance and monitor this closely.

Governors have reviewed safeguarding arrangements, approved the revised policy and regularly consider safeguarding matters from a well-informed standpoint. Equality impact assessments have been completed and annual reporting of equalities data and actions is in place. Some aspects of the reporting process lack rigour; for example in considering gaps in achievement between different groups over time and in comparing the staff gender profile with the gender balance within the learner population.

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