

# Abingdon and Witney College

## Reinspection monitoring visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 130793

**Name of lead inspector:** Janet Mercer HMI

**Last day of inspection:** 20 October 2011

**Type of provider:** General further education college

**Address:** Wootton Road  
Abingdon  
Oxfordshire  
OX14 1GG

**Telephone number:** 01235 555585

## Reinspection Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

### Context and focus of visit

Abingdon and Witney College is a large general further education college with three main sites in Abingdon, Witney and a rural skills centre at Common Leys, near Witney. A centre at Milton Park, near Didcot, provides training for businesses. A new centre in Witney provides training in construction skills.

The largest subject areas are arts and media, preparation for life and work and business, administration and law, which together make up around half of the work of the college. The college has considerable provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Around two thirds of the students are aged 16 to 18 and over 200 learners are on apprenticeship or work-based programmes. Some 7% of students are of minority ethnic heritage, a higher proportion than in the local population.

The college was last inspected in February 2011. Overall effectiveness, outcomes for learners, quality of provision and equality and diversity were judged satisfactory. Leadership and management, safeguarding and capacity to improve were judged good. Five subject areas were inspected and graded. Independent skills for life and leisure was judged outstanding, visual arts and media and hairdressing and beauty therapy were judged good, engineering was satisfactory and work-based learning in horticulture was inadequate.

### Themes

#### Self-assessment and improvement planning

<b>How well has Abingdon and Witney College improved the consistency of quality of curriculum area management and self-assessment to secure improvement in previously underperforming areas?</b>	<b>Reasonable progress</b>
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Since the last inspection, the college has re-structured 14 programme areas into 6 larger faculties. A new quality lead role has been created for each faculty to support the heads of faculty and to work closely with teachers and course leaders to monitor performance and improve the quality of provision and outcomes for learners. These changes are helping middle managers to work more closely together, share resources and good practice more effectively and to implement college systems and improvement strategies more consistently.

The college has strengthened its systems for monitoring performance at course, faculty and individual student level, with a four-weekly cycle of monitoring meetings with heads of faculty and quality leads. This has enabled managers to identify concerns much earlier in the academic year than previously and to take prompt action to secure improvements. The number of withdrawals and transfers from courses in the first half term is considerably smaller than at the same time last year.

All course and faculty level self-assessments follow a consistent format, with an increased focus on identifying the underlying reasons for particular successes or areas of weaker performance. This more detailed analysis is helping managers to formulate more sharply focused actions for improvement. While there are early signs of improvement in some areas previously causing concern, for example increased in-course retention on second year engineering programmes, it is too early to determine the full impact on raising success rates in this area. Although success rates on AS-level courses improved overall to around the national average, there remains considerable variation between individual courses. Whilst retention rates for 16- to 18-year-olds on intermediate level courses improved, declining results in GCSE mathematics and science, and on a few BTEC first diploma courses, meant pass rates were lower on intermediate level courses than in the previous year.

**How well has Abingdon and Witney College improved its systems for the moderation of internal lesson observations to ensure greater consistency of judgments and grading?**

**Reasonable progress**

The college has revised its internal lesson observation process to ensure a greater emphasis on the impact of teaching on students' learning and progress in lessons. The number of college observers has been significantly reduced to a team of 12 observers, comprised of the faculty heads and quality leads. All observers have had recent training in moderating observations and reports to ensure greater consistency in judgments and the quality of written reports and feedback to teachers. Detailed plans are in place for moderating internal lesson observations, due to start in November, but, at the time of the monitoring visit, it was too early to determine the full extent of the impact of revised systems on increasing the consistency of judgements across the college.

### **Outcomes for learners**

**To what extent can Abingdon and Witney College demonstrate further improvements in student achievement – overall and particularly in previously underperforming areas, such as AS-level and GCSE courses and for male students aged 16 to 18?**

**Reasonable progress**

Overall success rates have improved further in 2011 and were six percentage points above the previous year's national average. Long-course success rates improved at all levels to well above average for 16- to 18-year-olds on foundation level programmes and around average for students on intermediate and advanced-level courses. Success rates for adults on long courses were well above average at all levels.

The college's carefully considered strategies to raise the achievement of young male students have had a positive impact on reducing the difference in male and female success rates for students aged 16 to 18. Success rates on AS-level courses vary considerably. They were high in art and design, English literature, English language, economics, photography and philosophy, but very low in biology, law and mathematics. Value added data indicate that too few students made the progress

expected compared to their GCSE results and the proportion achieving A and B grades remained below the national average. The proportion of students achieving A\* to C grades in GCSE courses declined in 2011, particularly in mathematics and science. Results improved in GCSE English, but remained a little below average.

The college has implemented an innovative approach in advanced-level vocational provision, through the 'Professional Futures' programme, designed to raise success rates further for 16- to 18-year-olds and to enhance their work-related skills. The pairing of different vocational areas to work on shared projects is enabling staff and students to work collaboratively and develop new skills and explore different approaches to learning. Students can already identify specific benefits such as applying their learning and skills in a practical and work-related context. Teachers are very positive about how the new arrangements help them to be more creative in trying out new ideas and approaches in their teaching.

**What progress has Abingdon and Witney College made in increasing rates of progress for work-based learners? How well has it developed appropriate systems to ensure good progress for learners on new work-based programmes?**

**Significant progress**

Success rates in apprenticeships and Train to Gain provision improved well in 2011, although too few apprentices completed within the expected timescale. Current apprentices and learners on Train to Gain programmes are making much more rapid progress this year, so that success rates for those who started in January 2011 are well above national averages. The proportion of learners completing courses in the expected timescale is also now high.

The college has strengthened the management of work-based learning, appointing a new head of apprenticeships, a head of business development and a quality lead for this area of work. These managers have introduced significant changes to practice that are leading to improvements in success rates for learners and the quality of provision. Progress reviews have improved, although the college acknowledges that the quality of reviews is not yet consistently high in all areas of provision.

In horticulture the success rates and the proportion of learners who complete within their planned time have improved significantly and are now well above average for those who started in January 2011. Horticulture employers are very supportive of new programmes and recruitment is strong. They are well informed about the programme and plans for the future. Current learners on horticulture programmes are making good progress.

## Quality of provision

**How well has Abingdon and Witney College supported teachers in effective use of information and learning technology (ILT) and promoting equality and diversity in lessons, and to what extent does college monitoring identify the impact of this?**

**Reasonable progress**

Teachers are responding positively to training in using ILT to enhance learning. The recently appointed quality leads provide good opportunities for staff to share good practice and learn from each other. E-learning mentors provide training and advice to teachers on how to improve their skills in using ILT effectively to help learners. The college has introduced a new virtual learning environment which both staff and students see as an improvement on the previous system, although not all the materials and approaches in the new system are yet fully developed. Inspectors observed some good examples of ILT use to enliven lessons and help learning. For example, forensic science students learnt how photographic evidence might be altered and how they could check for this.

Training in promoting equality and diversity through the curriculum has raised the awareness of teachers in how they can integrate relevant themes into their lessons and assignments. For example, in a beauty therapy lesson students considered the suitability of skin treatments for different groups of clients and how to tailor these for individual requirements. Equality and diversity are required elements in schemes of work and lesson plans and the college monitors how effectively teachers promote them through its internal lesson observations.

**How well has Abingdon and Witney College monitored the impact of its revised learning support arrangements to ensure that students needing support receive it and that it is effective in helping them to achieve?**

**Significant progress**

Revised approaches to supporting students had been introduced shortly before the last inspection and these are working well. Support is now offered in a wider variety of settings by more support staff. 'The Link' centres form a central support service and provide welcoming, comfortable and well-equipped spaces in which to work and learn. Students value the support they receive from all the support staff including the new learning mentors and the student performance managers. A variety of measures demonstrate the positive impact of additional support. For example: fewer students are withdrawing at an early stage of their course; success rates in functional skills qualifications have improved and are above average; student surveys show a much more positive view about the effectiveness of additional support and success rates for students who receive support are at least as good as their peers.

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