

The Sheffield College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

The Sheffield College is a large general further education college. It is situated on four main campuses across the city: Sheffield City College in the centre, Hillsborough College to the north, Norton College in the south and Peaks College in the south-east of the city. The college consolidated its community provision during 2011 to Hillsborough Barracks, in the north of the city, The Source to the east and Fir Vale to the north-west. Courses are available at all levels from pre-entry to higher education in all subject areas and include apprenticeship and Train to Gain provision. In 2010/11 the college enrolled around 23,350 learners. The majority of full-time learners are aged 16 to 18 and most part-time learners are adults.

The college was last inspected in March 2010. At that inspection the college was judged to be satisfactory overall. Outcomes for learners, quality of provision, and leadership and management were all judged to be satisfactory. Its capacity to improve was judged to be good. Provision in the subject areas inspected was judged to be good in three and satisfactory in three. At the focused monitoring visit carried out in October 2010 the college was judged to have made significant progress against three themes and reasonable progress against four.

This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, which include the two mandatory themes of outcomes for learners, and self-assessment and improvement planning.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in self-assessment and quality improvement planning so that underperforming areas are being effectively addressed? **Reasonable Progress**

Since the previous monitoring visit, the college has integrated self-assessment and quality improvement planning more effectively into management processes at all levels. The college has taken effective action to improve the worst performing courses, substantially reducing the proportion of provision below the minimum level of performance for 2010/11, and targeting the remaining underperforming courses for improvement in 2011/12. Weaknesses identified in one of the local college self-assessment reports led to a significant improvement in framework success rates in 2011/12 on the Foundation Learning programme. Managers use departmental reviews well to monitor the impact of the quality improvement plan.

The college has broadened the use of learner feedback to improve provision, introducing new approaches to gather more qualitative evidence. These include learner-led surveys and a paid 'learner link' post at Norton College to consult with learners and managers over improvements. These initiatives have led to

developments such as the provision of an additional study area, and an inter-site shuttle bus. Consultation with employers has continued to support new curriculum initiatives. The use of classroom observations for self-assessment is well-established. However, the evidence base is now more extensive, and managers use observations more effectively to improve individual performance.

Outcomes for learners

What progress made has been made in improving success rates and outcomes for adult learners?

Reasonable Progress

The long course success rate for adult learners has been below the national average and in the bottom 25% of comparable colleges for the last three years, with major issues relating to both retention and achievement. The college has identified that the main cause of the problem was poor success rates in skills for life and ESOL courses, a significant proportion of outcomes in this area. Wide ranging strategies have been implemented in 2011/12, with decisions relating to staffing, the course offer and structure, made in 2010/11 to ensure full implementation from the start of the academic year 2011/12. These have been based on, and grown from, the successful strategies that increased the short courses success rate significantly from 2009/10 to 2010/11.

A major restructuring of staffing, at all levels, with a strategic lead across the whole college from senior level, has taken place. Some courses are no longer running and the course structure of others has been significantly changed. Data management issues have been addressed, with staff now having a much better understanding of data, its use and benefits, and communications have improved. The positive impact of these changes can already be seen. The detailed monitoring and tracking systems show significant numbers of learners have already sat and passed their exams this year, with a much higher success rate than last year. In addition retention is higher this year than for the comparable period last year.

What progress made has been made in improving success rates and outcomes for learners aged 16-18?

Reasonable Progress

The long course success rate for learners aged 16 to 18 shows an improving trend from 2008/09 to 2010/11, increasing at a faster rate than the national average. In this time the success rate has improved from the bottom 25% of comparable colleges to just below average in 2010/11. Data to date for 2011/12 show a continuation of this upward trend, with further increases in retention.

The college has built on improvements in previous years and used a restructuring of staff to enhance its focus on learners and their support. The tracking and monitoring system is being used more effectively across the whole college for learners on full

time courses, to ensure issues are identified as early as possible and effective support strategies put in place to deal with them. Tutor mentors and learner success managers are working well with all staff to make sure detailed information is available on the electronic monitoring system and is followed up. Communications have been enhanced. There is a focus on positive engagement, to find the reason for an issue and work with learners to resolve it quickly and effectively, and improving teaching and learning so that all learner needs are met.

What progress has the college made in improving success rates and outcomes for specific vulnerable groups and narrowing achievement gaps?

Reasonable Progress

The college has worked hard on this aspect and in some areas has made strong progress. Across the college there is a clear focus on supporting vulnerable learners and examples of case studies show the positive impact of support strategies on individuals with multiple barriers to learning. A key feature is the developing role of tutor mentors and learner success managers.

The difference in achievements that was apparent between learners aged 16 to 18 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their peers, in 2009/10, has been completely closed in 2010/11, with an increase in success rate of more than ten percentage points. The corresponding gap for adult learners has been reduced markedly.

Differences in levels of achievement between some minority ethnic groups have been reduced but there remains significant underperformance for some groups, such as Bangladeshi learners of both age groups. College staff have identified these issues and have a range of strategies in place to deal with them, for example the enlargement of the learner development officer team, so that there is now one officer at each major college site to focus on this issue. Retention data to date for this year shows a marked increase to last year, particularly for specific minority ethnic groups which have been underachieving in previous years.

Quality of Provision

What progress has been made in embedding developments in the teaching and learning observation scheme and ensuring it links effectively to staff development and training, and the sharing of good practice?

Reasonable Progress

Teaching and learning has a very high profile within the college and the observation scheme is continually developing to support improvements. In 2010/11 a much higher percentage of staff were observed and strategies to ensure accurate grading

were implemented which led to a profile which more closely reflected the outcomes for learners. The scheme has been further enhanced this year to ensure clarity of roles within the organisation, such as those of teacher facilitators, mentors and observers. There are strengthened communications between different groups and regular updates to ensure staff are aware of developments. The introduction of the professional development review (PDR) is building closer links between lesson observation outcomes, staff targets and training and development. However as the current form of the PDR has only been introduced this year it is too early to see its full impact.

There is a much stronger focus on sharing good practice across the whole college, and staff are finding this helpful and informative. The introduction of standardisation and moderation days has supported departments from different sites coming together and sharing good practice. There has been a culture change with staff seeing themselves as part of the complete organisation, rather than just their department or local college site, but this has not yet had sufficient time to be embedded in all areas and for its full positive impact to be seen.

What progress has the college made in improving the tracking and monitoring of learners' progress?**Reasonable Progress**

To strengthen the capacity of staff to monitor and support learners' progress, the college has phased in a new electronic recording system. Building on a pilot carried out three years ago, and a partial introduction last year, the college has extended the system this year to include all 16 to 18 year old learners on full-time courses. This system enables teachers, tutors and curriculum managers to record learners' goals, readily access information about their attendance and progress, and take prompt action where a learner's progress is at risk. The new arrangements have already had a positive impact on attendance and retention.

The introduction of additional tutorial and support roles this year has increased the college's capacity to make full use of this new system. This is beginning to have a positive impact on achievement. Learners value the easy access this electronic system gives them to information about their progress. The college recognises that there is further work to do to develop the consistent and effective use of the system across the college. Quality checks, staff development and continuous review and development of the procedures support this. Extending access to parents, and including information on assignment feedback are two further developments currently under consideration.

Leadership and Management

What progress has been made in the effective use of targets and data analysis in self-assessment at all levels in the college? Reasonable Progress

Recent changes in the college's management structure and roles have contributed to a significant culture shift and shared commitment towards continuous improvement across the whole college. Extension of cross-college roles, such as those of the assistant principals, has increased opportunities to share good practice and supported the move towards greater consistency in quality of provision. The more frequent and rigorous monitoring procedures, supported by the better availability and use of performance data, has enabled the college at all levels to identify areas for improvement and take action more quickly.

Changes to the head of department role have made a particularly significant contribution to this culture shift. Heads of department now have greater ownership of, and responsibility for, self-assessment and improvement planning. They make more effective use of target-setting for individual staff and for departmental performance. The course review process has improved, drawing on a wider range of indicators, and the quality improvement plan is used more effectively as a working document at departmental level.

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