

Epping Forest College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Deborah Vaughan-Jenkins HMI

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Address: Borders Lane
Loughton
Essex
IG10 3SA

Telephone number: 0208 5088311

FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Epping Forest College is a medium-sized general further education college in West Essex. At the time of the monitoring visit, some 3,036 learners were enrolled at the college, of who 2,218 were aged 16 to 18 and around 35% of learners were of minority ethnic heritage. The majority of learners are full time and the largest proportion of enrolments are at advanced level. Some 162 learners follow apprenticeship programmes. In August 2011 and April 2012 respectfully, the vice principal for finance and estates and the interim Principal and were appointed to permanent posts to stabilise the college's senior management team. Since the previous inspection, the college has relocated its provision in construction, visual and performing arts and hairdressing and beauty therapy to the main college campus.

The college received its last full Ofsted inspection in March 2010, at which time inspectors judged the college to be satisfactory for overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management. Of the four subject areas inspected, visual arts and media were judged to be good, and health and social care, business and administration and literacy and numeracy were judged to be satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during this monitoring visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in college-wide quality monitoring and self-assessment procedures, to ensure consistent and sustainable improvements across the college's provision?

Reasonable progress

Since the inspection in 2010, the college has strengthened its college-wide quality monitoring procedures, particularly for course performance, and notably so for A-level provision. For example, A-level teaching staff, support staff and managers now meet on a weekly basis to review in much greater detail the progress of any learners who may be at risk of not succeeding. As a result, team communication is improving, support is better directed and the sharing of good practice across A-level subjects is more systematic.

The college has strengthened its monitoring of attendance. While overall learners' attendance rates remain satisfactory, they are improving across all college departments. The tracking of attendance at course level has improved and staff use initiatives such as the inventive 'Wish You Were Here' postcards more widely across the college to emphasise the importance of good attendance to learners and to parents and carers. The college's in-year data show that overall retention and attendance rates are slightly higher than at the same point last year but are notably higher on A-level provision.

Graded judgments within the majority of curriculum self-assessments are well founded. The main college self-assessment report, however, does not provide convincing evidence to support all of its judgments, such as the evaluation of outcomes for learners. In addition, the analysis and reporting of some outcomes, such as the performance of different groups of learners, lack detail. As a result, the closing or widening of gaps in achievement are not always reported and addressed clearly enough.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving learners' outcomes since the last inspection, notably in long course success, retention and pass rates?

Reasonable progress

The college's long course success rate improved further in 2010/11 and remains one percentage point above that of similar colleges. For learners aged 16 to 18, success rates increased notably at foundation and intermediate levels to be just above the national averages but success rates fell at advanced level and were five percentage points below average. At curriculum level, success rates improved across the majority of subject areas.

Across nearly all levels and for both age groups, retention rates are consistently high. The college's in-year data indicate that these high retention rates have been at least maintained and in some cases improved upon in this academic year. Pass rates for adult learners have improved over three years and were broadly at or above average in 2010/11. However, for those aged 16 to 18, and despite some improvements at foundation level, overall long course pass rates were below national average in 2010/11 and this has suppressed success rates, most notably on advanced-level programmes. Managers have identified this issue clearly through the college's self-assessment and the quality improvement plan. However, while the proportion of learners completing their course remains high, it is too early to judge the full impact of management actions to improve learners' achievements this academic year.

How much progress has been made in ensuring that learners on AS- and A-level programmes make the progress of which they are capable, and achieve high grades?

Insufficient progress

While management actions were successful in improving pass rates on A-level programmes in 2010/11, actions taken to improve high grades and progress measures on A-level provision were unsuccessful. The proportion of learners who gained high grades on AS and A2 courses declined and remained low. In addition, trends in value-added data indicated that learners were still not making the progress of which they were capable in too many A-level subjects. College managers are aware of these issues although they have not included sufficient analysis of them in the self-assessment report. In addition, they have not evaluated learners' high grade

achievements in the main outcomes section and only reference them explicitly as an area for improvement in one of the 14 subject areas.

To intensify the focus on, and improve high grades in 2011/12 the college has introduced a clear three-strand strategy which includes focusing on learners' academic skills, developing the use of challenging homework and improving learners' use and understanding of key terminology and language. This approach is still in the very early stages of development and has yet to be established in all lessons.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in using the college's observation scheme and staff development to increase the proportion of good or outstanding lessons?

Reasonable progress

Evidence from the monitoring visit suggests that the college continues to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Since the previous inspection it has appointed a teaching and learning coach to work with and support teaching staff to enhance their practice. In addition to unannounced observations, staff use less formal peer observations more widely to aid in the sharing of ideas and good practice. All staff whose lessons are judged to be satisfactory by college observers are now given priority for re-observation. The college's analysis of formal observations is comprehensive. Over the past two years, the college's observation data indicate that the number of inadequate lessons has halved and the proportion of good or better grades has increased. Inspectors' and college observers' views on strengths and areas for development from nine joint lesson observations, carried out during the monitoring visit, were closely aligned. Moderation arrangements for written records of observations are not yet sufficiently rigorous; records do not always consistently explain or support the grade awarded, particularly in the case of lessons deemed outstanding.

What progress has the college made to improve the use of information and learning technologies to support learning?

Significant progress

The college is planning and implementing the use of learning technologies very successfully. A clear strategy, driven directly by governors and senior managers, is raising the profile of information and learning technologies (ILT) effectively across all aspects of the college's work. A college manager now leads on e-learning and innovation and a rapidly established e-mentoring scheme, which includes the deployment of 12 e-learning coaches and a large number of e-mentors, provides good levels of support to college staff.

Over the last two years, the college has invested extensively in a wide range of electronic learning resources, including touch-screen, multi-media devices, which learners use increasingly often and effectively to support their studies. In addition, e-books are readily available in the college library and interactive whiteboards are in most classrooms. The virtual learning environment is becoming well established and

its utilisation by learners and teaching staff has improved notably over the last 18 months. Student e-mentors, established for two years, are very effective in supporting both teachers and learners in developing skills in using the range of learning resources. The use of ILT in lessons is frequent but its creative use to support and inspire learning is less widespread.

How much progress has been made in improving the quality of learners' target setting and in the frequency and quality of progress reviews? **Reasonable progress**

The college has recently implemented an electronic tracking system for recording and monitoring learners' progress, attendance, punctuality and minimum target grades. This is enabling teachers to gain a more frequent, holistic overview of learners' performance against their academic targets. Although it is too early to see the full impact of the new system on success rates and high grades, the college's data show that learners' attendance and punctuality have improved this year.

The college has developed a revised feedback form for recording details of learners' short- and medium-term targets and to help develop their learning and progress. While the college accurately identifies that staff in some curriculum areas are recording and monitoring these effectively, it also acknowledges that this is not yet replicated across all departments. The college has plans for further training for teachers at the end of the summer term to reinforce the expectations of progress reviews and to disseminate good practice. In the best practice seen by inspectors during the monitoring visit, learners took full responsibility for their targets and wrote carefully considered, bespoke objectives to help them develop their own skills and knowledge. Where target setting and reviews are less effective, they tend to be used only to record when an assignment or unit should be completed and/or do not encourage learners to develop their learning points and study skills across different topics.

What progress has been made to improve links with employers, both in order to develop work-related provision and to improve learners' employment prospects? **Significant progress**

At the previous inspection the college had insufficient links with employers. Since then, the steps taken to improve its links with employers and to expand its employment-related provision have been successful. The college is now represented in local and regional employer partnership alliances and is making very productive contacts with large employers to develop its apprenticeship offer further. The number of learners on apprenticeship programmes on either the college's subcontracted arrangements or within the college's own work-based learning provision has risen from 39 during 2010/11 to 183. While the college-based apprenticeship numbers were still relatively low in 2010/11, success rates were high and a much higher than average proportion of apprentices completed their programmes within the allocated time.

College managers are currently in the process of developing specific projects which involve working closely with Jobcentre Plus to provide short work-based learning courses for unemployed adults and for groups of young people who are identified as being not in education, employment or training.

What progress has been made in improving the range and opportunities available for work experience?

Reasonable progress

The college acknowledges the difficulties of finding traditional types of work placement and work experience for learners across all of the different curriculum subjects. While this aspect still remains an area for development, the college is working productively on alternative approaches to increasing learners' vocational expertise and experience. These include developing a range of extended projects or specific activities with local employers to provide learners with opportunities to practise their skills in associated real work settings. For example, learners in hairdressing and beauty therapy now visit a local hospital to practise their skills. The college is yet to establish coherent monitoring of this work to gauge fully the range and extent of work-related links across departments and the number of these vocational opportunities being taken up by learners.

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