

Strode College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Tertiary college

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Strode College is a tertiary college located in Street, Somerset, serving the education and training needs of the Mendip area, which consists of a number of small towns and dispersed rural areas. The college recruited 1,727 full-time learners in 2010/11 of whom almost all were aged 16 to 18. Some 80% of learners in this age group were studying at advanced level and nearly 60% of these took AS or A-level qualifications. The prior attainment of learners aged 16 to 18 in advanced level courses is in line with the national average for sixth form colleges. The most popular subject areas in terms of learner numbers in 2010/11 were science and mathematics, and visual and performing arts and media.

At the last inspection in October 2008, inspectors judged overall effectiveness, outcomes for learners, quality of provision, and leadership and management to be good. The college's capacity to improve was outstanding. In line with the protocols for inspecting colleges which were good in their previous inspection, no subject areas were inspected in depth. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has Strode College made in ensuring that self-assessment is rectifying areas for improvement from the last inspection and in improving the quality of provision?	Significant progress
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The last inspection report stated that the college was more effective at identifying strengths than areas for improvement, and that arrangements for agreeing and moderating graded judgements in self-assessment were insufficiently rigorous, leading to some over-generous grading.

The current self-assessment is a highly evaluative document in which judgements are well supported with appropriate evidence and performance data, using a broader range of performance measures than previously. The move away from self-assessment at curriculum level provides much greater clarity and focus on the performance of individual courses and of the learners who study on them. Course managers value the opportunity to discuss the performance of their courses and to agree course-level targets with the Principal. This emphasis on individual courses has led to very precise actions for improvement of the provision and target-setting based firmly on the prior performance and prospects of learners. The weighting of value added data in self-assessment and target setting and the rigorous and systematic monitoring of progress towards these targets have contributed to significant improvements in learners' progress. In graded qualifications at advanced level in 2010/11 learners made better progress from their starting points on entry than in the previous year. Current data show that learners' performance is set to exceed minimum target grades.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has Strode College made in improving students' outcomes since the last inspection?

Significant progress

At the last inspection success rates were high but had not risen as quickly as the college would have wished over the previous three years. Success rates in the large amount of AS-level and A-level provision were broadly in line with the high sixth form college national average, but the college was not routinely benchmarking its performance at this higher level, although the prior attainment of the college's students on these courses was similar to that of students in a typical sixth form college.

The college now measures performance in AS-level and A-level courses using the sixth form college national average. Success rates for AS and A levels combined were in line with this high national average in 2010/11. In AS-level courses, pass rates have been above the sixth form college national average in each of the past two years and learners' progress was in the top 25% of similar providers in 2010/11, an improvement on the previous year. In A levels, performance improved from 2009/10 with pass rates and high-grade pass rates above the sixth form college national average once more. Learners' progress improved on the previous year and was in the top 40% of providers. BTEC qualifications at level 3 saw high success rates and learners' progress in the top 25%. The college is working hard to ensure that students stay on their full programme of AS levels and in-year data indicate it is meeting with success.

Quality of provision

What progress has Strode College made in improving the consistency and quality of tutorial provision and the monitoring of students' progress?

Significant progress

At the last inspection the quality of most tutorial provision was good. However, students had reported some inconsistencies in the quality and effectiveness of tutorial sessions and the rigour of monitoring of their progress. The college was planning to introduce an electronic tracking system to improve the monitoring of students' progress.

The college has since reviewed and updated its tutorial policy, providing clear guidance to staff and students about entitlement, delivery and content. Comprehensive but flexible schemes of work, lesson plans and support materials have made the quality and effectiveness of tutorials much more consistent across the college. Tutorial staff have access to helpful training and support materials to ensure they provide all students with regular tutorials which are very effective in monitoring their progress and setting challenging, but realistic, achievement targets. The college has developed comprehensive electronic systems for monitoring students' progress.

Staff and students use these very effectively. Students have a very good understanding of their minimum target grades and the relationship with their aspirational and progress grades. Responses to recent college surveys indicate that most students value the support of their personal tutors and judge tutorials as good or very good.

Leadership and management

What improvements has Strode College made to arrangements for identifying and raising the proportion of outstanding lessons?

Significant progress

At the last inspection, teaching and learning were good. Lesson observers were skilled at identifying the quality of teaching and learning in most lessons. However, observers were less adept at identifying outstanding teaching and learning.

The college has introduced new arrangements for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning which have resulted in a significant improvement in the proportion of outstanding lessons. The focus on teaching and learning is stronger and the involvement of all staff, including senior management, has increased. The college can now identify more accurately the characteristics of outstanding teaching and learning and communicate these clearly to staff. The new arrangements sharply identify areas for development. Staff training and development days are well planned around these themes. A comprehensive and detailed handbook provides very good guidance for staff and observers. The college sets high expectations of its staff and provides very good, well-tailored support and development activities. Observers provide accurate and perceptive comments for staff which help them to improve. The analysis of observation grades against examination results and students' perceptions about the quality of their learning demonstrate the thoroughness and accuracy of these new arrangements.

What progress has Strode College made in using data to inform more timely interventions to keep students on programme?

Significant progress

In its most recent self-assessment report the college identified as an area for improvement the need for earlier monitoring of data to inform more timely interventions necessary to keep students on programme. The college conducted an in-depth analysis of reasons for withdrawal and has put in place appropriate preventative measures to good effect. For example, analysis of case studies from 2010/11 revealed that students who were the only enrolment from their school were disproportionately likely to leave at AS level. As a result, buddying arrangements were put in place for the students involved this academic year, and only one has left to date. Staff make systematic and frequent use of a comprehensive and well-designed range of performance indicators to identify learners at risk of underachieving or withdrawing from their programmes. Performance monitoring

leads to interventions to support learners that are timely, appropriate, and effective. Current data indicate a higher proportion of learners remaining on programme than at the same time last year.

What progress has Strode College made in order to improve the accuracy, reliability and consistency of grade predictions in target setting for learners? **Significant progress**

The college's current self-assessment report identifies a need to improve the accuracy of teachers' grade predictions to inform students' progress reviews and target setting. It has made significant progress in developing a progress review system which very effectively analyses current performance against the minimum target grade to set more accurate and reliable targets and grade predictions at various points in the year.

Minimum targets are set early. Staff make very good use of electronic monitoring systems to review and discuss regularly individual performance with students and to make adjustments to the target grades on the basis of their current work. The process is comprehensive and clear to all. Students' satisfaction with progress monitoring has improved. Curriculum and course managers make good use of performance information to plan interventions where a student is not working at their targeted level. Support meets individual needs well. The senior management team gives a high priority to progress monitoring and the setting of accurate target grades. The Principal chairs quality review meetings which identify areas for concern at course and qualification level. The college has carried out a thorough analysis of its grade predictions, which has demonstrated a significant improvement in their accuracy and reliability.

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