

Milton Keynes College

Partial reinspection report

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Introduction

Milton Keynes College is a large general further education college on three sites in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire. Over 60% of learners in learner-responsive provision at the college are aged 16 to 18. Some 55% of these study courses at advanced level, most of which are vocational courses. The college works with around 600 employers to provide a combination of apprenticeships, adult training, professional qualifications and commercial training. The college also holds a very large contract for the provision of offender learning. The city has areas of severe economic deprivation, which are among the most deprived 10% of all areas in England.

At the previous inspection in March 2011, the overall effectiveness of provision was satisfactory, as were outcomes for learners, the quality of provision, leadership and management, and the capacity to improve. Safeguarding arrangements and the promotion of equality and diversity were good. Provision in hairdressing and beauty therapy was good, while that in uniformed public services, visual arts and media, and business, administration and law was satisfactory. Provision in science and mathematics was inadequate.

At the monitoring visit in November 2011, the college was judged to have made reasonable progress in all areas reviewed, including in improving the quality of provision in science and mathematics.

The outcome of the reinspection is as follows:

Subject area/type of provision	Original grade	Reinspection grade
Science and mathematics	4	3

Context

The college offers A levels in biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics and psychology to 32 learners, and an access to higher education course in science. At the time of the re-inspection, around 36 learners were studying one or more of these subjects at AS level. Some 40 learners study GCSE in science, psychology or mathematics. In addition, 26 learners take BTEC national qualifications in forensic science. Most learners are aged 16 to 18 and study full time.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are satisfactory. In 2010/11 the proportion of learners successfully achieving their qualifications improved. Outcomes for A-level biology, physics and psychology were at or above national averages, but were well below for chemistry and mathematics.

- Outcomes improved at AS level and were satisfactory in chemistry, physics and mathematics. Despite improvements on the previous year, outcomes remained poor in biology and psychology. Successes in advanced-level forensic science were good and achievement rates in GCSE mathematics and sciences improved to around national averages.
- The proportion of learners completing A-level and GCSE qualifications was good in 2010/11, but poor for AS-level biology and psychology. The college's data for 2011/12 show a marked improvement in the proportion of learners completing their courses at all levels. Recent national test results indicate that achievement in AS and A-level courses have improved, compared to the same time last year. Attendance has improved slightly over the past year and is satisfactory.
- Learners enjoy their studies and work conscientiously in lessons. They work safely in the laboratories and show enthusiasm for learning. They make the expected progress compared to their prior attainment. Around 70% of current A-level learners have been offered undergraduate places through UCAS, which represents an improvement on previous years.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory and teachers plan revision sessions imaginatively. In most lessons short, well-focused individual and small group activities help learners to check their knowledge, develop confidence and practise their examination technique. Teachers are confident in their knowledge and use information and learning technology (ILT) well to enliven lessons and engage learners' interest.
- However, in a minority of lessons, teachers do not always plan to ensure that activities meet the full range of ability, which slows learners' progress. Teachers sometimes ask undirected questions and talk for too long so that learners become passive and lose interest.
- Learners behave well in lessons, and are keen to improve. They ask questions thoughtfully and listen to each other respectfully. Teachers mark their work regularly with helpful comments on how to make progress. Managers and teachers make good use of the recently introduced electronic system to monitor learners' progress.
- Teachers and managers have implemented rigorous and regular assessments of learners' progress. This has resulted in secure monitoring and more accurate predicted grades for learners to work towards. Learners understand their target grades, but many written targets in individual learning plans are not sufficiently measurable or specific to help learners improve.
- The range of programmes in science and mathematics is satisfactory. Advanced-level courses in sciences, mathematics and psychology enable learners to progress to undergraduate and employment locally and nationally. Vocational science courses and an access to higher education course allow a wider range of learners to study at advanced level. Modest pass rates in GCSE in mathematics and the sciences mean that the college does not recruit many intermediate-level learners to its advanced-level provision.
- Course teams have implemented more rigorous entry requirements for advanced-level courses to ensure that learners are adequately qualified to start

their programmes. Teachers give good personal support and help to learners, often in their own time. Academic support is now a common feature of tutorial sessions.

- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Learners like the way the staff treat them as adults and with respect. Progress has been made in addressing the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Managers understand their responsibilities more clearly. Staff at all levels more actively identify learners who are underperforming and provide appropriate and timely support. Self-assessment and plans to improve provision are satisfactory.

What does Milton Keynes College need to do to improve further?

- Raise learners' attainment, especially in AS-level and GCSE courses, by ensuring that all lessons are planned to meet the full range of learners' needs and abilities and engage learners' interests.
- Help learners to become more independent in their learning by setting measurable, short-term targets for them and ensuring they are completed.

Additional Themes

Inspectors explored the following themes as part of this reinspection.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has the college made in ensuring that self-assessment and quality improvement systems are effective in improving the quality of provision and outcomes for learners?

Reasonable progress

The college has built on the improvements noted at the previous monitoring visit. Through a comprehensive review, senior leaders identified that previous systems led staff to be too focused on procedures and documentation and, as a result, were not effective enough in improving teaching and learning and outcomes for learners. Managers have acted swiftly on the recommendations from an external review, resulting in more analytical and self-critical curriculum area self-assessment reports (SAR) for 2010/11. Quality improvement plans now contain clearer and more detailed actions to secure improvements, although in some cases these lack specific and quantifiable targets.

The college SAR provided a rigorous and self-critical analysis of underlying reasons for the decline in success rates seen in many areas of provision in 2010/11. Managers have strengthened systems for monitoring learners' performance throughout the year, with staff at all levels now using recently introduced electronic assessment and tracking systems to monitor achievement and progress at learner, course, department and college level. College data indicate some marked improvements in retention rates this year, and managers are confident that data on learners' progress and achievement are more accurate than last year.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving learners' outcomes since the last inspection?

Reasonable progress

Overall success rates declined in 2010/11, and, in most areas, were lower than those in the previous year. The college's analysis identified a decline in both retention and achievement rates in many areas of provision, particularly for learners aged 16 to 18. Managers undertook detailed analysis of the underlying reasons for this, strengthened monitoring systems and re-organised the curriculum to meet learners' needs more effectively. These actions enabled the college to make some significant improvements in retention rates in almost all areas and levels of provision by the end of May 2012. Improvements are most marked on advanced-level provision, where in eight subject areas, retention rates are more than ten percentage points higher than the previous year. There are also marked improvements in intermediate-level

provision in health and social care, construction, retail and commercial enterprise and arts and media.

The creation of new programme manager roles, from autumn 2011, has greatly improved the college's ability to monitor performance at course and learner level, with weekly reviews of attendance, retention and progress. Managers have been able to identify any areas of underperformance, and learners at risk of not completing their courses, much earlier than previously, and the swift support provided has enabled many more learners to complete their courses this year.

Learners' outcomes improved in AS- and A-level courses in 2011. Success rates were around the national average for A-level courses, but remained below average on AS-level programmes. Module results from January examinations for AS- and A-level subjects indicate further improvement in learners' achievements, although not consistently so in all subjects. There has also been a small increase in the numbers of learners progressing successfully to higher education.

Quality of provision

How much progress has the college made in its work to improve teaching and learning and share good practice, including more consistently effective use of ILT?

Reasonable progress

The college has continued to develop the work on sharing good practice to improve teaching and learning noted at the last monitoring visit. The work of the leading teachers is having a positive impact on improving teachers' practice. Teachers value the feedback provided following themed learning walks, and course teams are becoming increasingly involved in the process, identifying themes to explore or areas where they need support. Many teachers find that the regular learning walks and developmental feedback have been more useful in supporting improvement than a single graded observation each year. Staff have also benefited from increased sharing of good practice between different areas within the college, and more opportunities to visit other providers.

The college's own analysis of internal lesson observations this year indicates a more rigorous and accurate appraisal of the quality of teaching. While much good practice is evident, managers acknowledge that there remains a significant minority of lessons which are satisfactory rather than good. However, additional support or training following observations has enabled teachers to improve their classroom practice.

Teachers make much more frequent use of ILT in lessons. The college acknowledges that not all staff have the same level of skills and confidence, but examples of creative approaches are increasing in number. For example, in a sports lesson, learners used a tablet computer to record performance in a sports coaching session,

enabling them to analyse their performance in detail and identify how they can improve and achieve higher grades.

What progress has been made in improving the quality of target setting for learners, and in the consistency of use of ILPs in all curriculum areas?

Reasonable progress

The introduction of an electronic assessment and tracking system for all full-time learners this year has enabled staff to monitor learners' progress much more rigorously across all curriculum areas. Course teams and support staff share information on learners' performance more effectively, including target grades, assessment outcomes, attendance data and comments from regular one-to-one reviews by tutors and learners. Teachers and tutors identify concerns about attendance or non-completion of work much more quickly and take prompt action to help learners get back on track to achieve their goals. Learners know and understand their target grades, based on their prior attainment, and teachers also set higher, aspirational targets to encourage them to achieve higher grades. Managers are currently adapting the system so that it is appropriate for use by part-time and work-based learners next year.

Learners often set their own goals and targets on their electronic learning plans, and teachers and tutors comment regularly on work and progress. However, the quality of written targets set by teachers varies considerably. While there are some good examples of precise and measurable targets, many are still much too general to really help learners know how to improve or achieve higher grades.

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