

Blake College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent specialist college

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Blake College is a small independent specialist art and design college offering a range of courses in arts and media in central London. Most learners are privately funded. A minority, 18 at the time of the monitoring visit, are government funded through the Skills Funding Agency and Young People's Funding Agency. Funded learners follow the foundation diploma in art and design and national awards, and are offered the same facilities, quality systems and process as all Blake's learners. The provision was inspected in November 2009. Overall effectiveness was satisfactory, as was capacity to improve. Leadership and management and overall success rates were satisfactory, but they were low for younger learners. Standards of learners' work were often good, but inconsistently so in fashion. Learners made good progress in their work and the quality of provision, including teaching and learning, was good. Learners' needs were well met and their care, guidance and support good, particularly for older learners, but guidance for younger learners was not sufficiently effective.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college made in developing its self-assessment and quality improvement planning to drive improvements since the last inspection?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection quality assurance systems, including self-assessment, were satisfactory, but were insufficiently extensive and systematic. The college involved staff in self-assessment and made use of learners' views. The college has improved the process of self-assessment through the implementation of online surveys for teachers and much better collection and use of learners' views. Although feedback to learners on what the college is doing to address the areas for improvement that they identify is too informal. The current self-assessment report more accurately reflects the Common Inspection Framework and leads into a useful quality improvement plan to monitor action. Since the inspection, the college has addressed effectively many of the required improvements, for example through standardising documentation, providing better pre-course information, improving classroom practice and introducing particularly thorough assessment and verification systems. However, managers still do not make the best use of management information to reach judgements about the effectiveness of provision, inform decisions and monitor the effectiveness of their quality improvement actions.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made in improving success rates, particularly for younger learners?

Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection learners' overall success rates were satisfactory; however, these were depressed by the poor performance of learners under the age of 19. Their overall success rate was low at only 58%. The retention of learners was high for those aged 19 and over, but low for younger learners. The college's overall pass rate was high. The success rate of younger learners has improved significantly, with high retention rates and 86% of learners aged 16 to 18 achieving their full qualification in 2010/11, which was good and above the national average. However, the success rate of adult learners in that year was disappointing and well below average. The college's own figures indicate that this was a one-year dip, and projected success rates in 2011/12 are back to near the national average with a current retention rate of 84%. Learners' progress to higher education, further education and employment is still good. The college has a clear idea of the issues, strengths and weaknesses of individual learners. It does not routinely analyse learner data by various equality categories, although these are recorded and the very small number of learners renders analysis of no statistical significance.

What progress has the college made in ensuring better punctuality and attendance of learners to help improve the standards of their work?

Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection learners' overall attendance and punctuality were satisfactory. However, the self-assessment report had identified continuing issues with punctuality and inspectors noted poor attendance and timekeeping in two lessons for fashion. Since then, the college has implemented a range of initiatives to improve attendance and punctuality. For example, learners are given clear guidance at the start of their programme on their responsibilities. Register keeping is rigorous and lateness is better challenged by tutors. Learners who arrive late are required to sign a special register, and managers follow up poor punctuality. Those arriving so late they would disrupt the class are barred from the session. Learners' non-attendance is chased with telephone calls and emails. Persistent lateness or non-attendance results in an interview with the Director of Studies. Where lateness was endemic in certain classes, new staff have been appointed to better motivate the learners. Anecdotal evidence suggests a significant improvement in both attendance and punctuality, and learners express more satisfaction with these classes. However, data on attendance and punctuality are not collated or analysed to demonstrate this improvement.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in improving advice and guidance for learners under the age of 19, in order to increase their retention and success rates? **Reasonable progress**

Initial advice and guidance were judged good overall at the last inspection, although for younger learners this was not as effective and a significantly smaller proportion stayed to complete their course. The college improved the retention rates, and consequently success, of these learners in 2010/11. They complete more detailed paperwork at the start of their course and this has had the intended consequence of divulging additional information that may have caused them to leave early. Staff now provide more effective targeted support and communicate effectively with learners using social media. They routinely and regularly monitor progress, and provide good and detailed feedback to learners. Students have opportunities to try various aspects of art and design, thereby establishing a clear pathway and range of units that meet their needs well. Foundation art students now produce a portfolio of work to ascertain their standard of work and level of ability to achieve the qualification. However, currently not all students are interviewed by an art and design specialist to find out if they have the capabilities and potential to succeed, and the college does not routinely assess or diagnose students' ability to cope with the academic requirements.

What progress has the college made in improving information and learning technology resources to enable better support for teaching and learning? **Significant progress**

At the previous inspection teaching and learning were judged to be good, although teachers did not use information and learning technologies enough and general resources, other than those used for digital specialist areas, were insufficient. Since 2009 the college has purchased additional information technology (IT) resources. Key staff have received training and are now routinely using IT to help learners to experiment with ideas and develop their creativity. Teachers now routinely teach theory subjects with the aid of IT, which helps students to see and understand a range of artists' practice and the historical context in which they worked. The college has purchased additional IT resources in photography to support and enliven learning, and the fashion area uses specialist software to aid students' presentations and design work. Since the last inspection the college has installed broadband and now has WiFi connectivity.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in ensuring the successful introduction of mechanisms to further improve the quality of teaching and learning?

Reasonable progress

At the last inspection the college's scheme for the observation of teaching and learning and opportunities for teachers to share good practice were not in place. Teachers discuss their practice with each other informally and many aspects of teaching and learning have improved since the last inspection. Teachers are conscientious in the way they discuss their teaching practice. For example, they meet with expert colleagues to develop the use of digital media, which has effectively improved their teaching. Teachers enliven lessons by sharing their professional practice effectively with their students. The college has improved assessment practice and now has well-organised, fair and reliable processes for grading project work. Feedback to learners is particularly thorough and valued highly by them. The college has reinstated an improved observation procedure, which is clear and detailed. It focuses well on the impact of teaching and learning, although the commentary is often too descriptive. Peer observations are taking place and helping teachers to improve their practice, although these are infrequent. Managers have tackled underperformance and new teachers have been recruited, although not all new teachers have yet been formally observed. The college recognises that report records and reporting data are insufficiently precise.

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