

Oaklands College

Partial reinspection report

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Type of provider: General Further Education College

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Introduction

Oaklands College is a large general further education college and one of four colleges within Hertfordshire. The college offers courses in all 15 sector subject areas with the majority of learners enrolled on programmes in the preparation for life and work, arts, media and publishing, health, public services and care, and construction and the built environment sector subject areas. The college has its own work-based learning contract and also provides Train to Gain, Entry to Employment and informal adult learning provision.

At the previous inspection in November 2009, the college was judged to be good overall, with good capacity to improve. Outcomes for learners, the quality of provision, leadership and management and safeguarding were good. The promotion of equality and diversity was satisfactory. Of the five curriculum areas inspected, four were good and construction employer responsive provision was inadequate. Construction employer responsive provision was reinspected in January 2011 and was judged inadequate. Reinspection monitoring visits of the college were also conducted in January and October 2011. This report comprises the reinspection of construction employer responsive provision and the outcomes of the three monitoring visit themes.

The outcome of the reinspection is as follows:

Subject area/type of provision	Original grade	Reinspection grade
Construction employer responsive provision	4	3

Context

The college offers work-based learning apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships in brickwork, carpentry and joinery, plumbing and electrical installation. At the time of inspection, 11 learners were on intermediate level courses and 79 were on advanced level courses. The vast majority of learners are male and approximately half are aged 16 to 18. All learners are employed and attend the college on a day-release basis to complete off-the-job training.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are good. The proportion of learners successfully completing and achieving their programme of study has increased significantly since the last inspection. Overall success rates in all vocational areas are above the corresponding national average rates and in 2011/12 the majority of learners completed within the timescale set.
- Learners make satisfactory progress and most are on target to achieve as expected. Attendance levels are satisfactory and monitored closely. Most learners enjoy their time at college and speak highly of the support provided by teachers and assessors. They particularly enjoy practical lessons and are complimentary about the practical resources.

- The standard of learners' work is satisfactory. Learners' portfolios contain a wide range of evidence that demonstrates their competence, including photographs of work completed, witness testimonials, drawings and other technical documentation. Practical work is produced to a satisfactory standard overall with some learners producing work of a high standard.
- Learners have a good understanding of health and safety practices and use the required personal protective safety equipment when working on site and in college workshops. Inspectors observed learners in carpentry and joinery using hand and power tools competently while constructing a window frame. A learner on a plumbing apprenticeship was observed in the workplace removing safely a radiator from a central heating system in an occupied house.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Practical teaching at the college enables the good development of learners' vocational skills. Classroom teaching develops satisfactorily learners' underpinning knowledge and understanding. However, the planning and sequencing of course delivery, especially in plumbing, does not always enable learners to develop skills and knowledge in a meaningful, logical and systematic way.
- Learners benefit from good practical training in the workplace. Most learners work alongside skilled supervisors who provide good support and assist them in developing their practical skills.
- Assessment is satisfactory. The assessment of learners' technical knowledge and practical skill development at the college is frequent and fair. The assessment of learners' competence in the workplace is satisfactory. Assessors conduct regular site visits and complete assessment in the workplace by direct observation. However, assessment visits are not always well planned to make best use of assessors', learners' or employers' time.
- The range of courses offered meets adequately the needs of learners and employers. Learners are able to progress from intermediate to advanced level apprenticeships in most vocational areas. Their literacy and numeracy skills are developed satisfactorily as part of their programme of study and they develop a broad understanding of the construction industry and of their employment rights and responsibilities.
- Partnerships with employers are satisfactory. Most employers speak highly of the support provided by assessors and are pleased with the progress that their employees make. However, a significant minority expressed concern with aspects of communication with the college and were critical about the timeliness of the college's response when dealing with matters raised.
- Guidance and support are good. Teachers and assessors provide good support to help learners achieve. Learners speak highly of the advice and guidance provided, especially with regard to completing evidence portfolios. Learners' progress is monitored frequently and reviews are completed regularly; learners receive clear action plans that detail what they need to do to further their progress and achievement.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Senior leaders' intervention has ensured that learners' progress is monitored very closely and this has improved

outcomes for learners. However, while beneficial changes have been made to curriculum management, further developments are necessary to enhance the quality of course management and to improve the planning and co-ordination of learning activities.

- Self-assessment is broadly accurate. Course teams, including assessors, review the quality of provision and good practice is shared more extensively. Managers are aware of the main strengths and of the areas in need of improvement. Capacity to improve further is satisfactory.

What does Oaklands College need to do to improve further?

- Review the planning and sequencing of course delivery, especially in plumbing, to ensure that learners develop knowledge, understanding and practical skills in a more meaningful, logical and systematic way.
- Plan assessment visits more effectively to ensure that employers', learners' and assessors' time is used more efficiently and that the required portfolio evidence can be collected.
- Enhance communication with employers by ensuring a timely response to any feedback received.
- Build on the progress made in improving curriculum management to drive further improvements in course management, to enhance the planning and coordination of courses and to improve the quality of provision.

Additional Themes

Inspectors explored the following themes as part of this reinspection.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in self-assessment and quality improvement planning so that underperforming areas noted in the last self assessment report are being effectively tackled? **Reasonable progress**

In the last twelve months, the new management team has increased the focus on improving the quality of provision. It has self-assessed accurately its key areas for improvement and developed quality assurance processes that are more rigorous and more learning-focused. Managers now pay more attention to canvassing and acting upon the views of learners. Course teams have been given more accountability for self-assessment and quality improvement. Actions and their impact are monitored closely by senior leaders through regular updates and focused review meetings.

Senior leaders have implemented an effective template for self-assessment and quality improvement at curriculum level, and a more rigorous monitoring and review procedure. The resulting reports are more focused on areas for improvement and actions needed to bring about improvements than previously. However, the reports do not always record the impact of actions taken. Where the college has identified underperformance in subject areas, it has taken strong steps to bring about improvements, using further internal and external support. Although the college is able to demonstrate reasonable increases in students' retention in the current year, it is too early to judge the impact on overall success rates.

Outcomes for learners

What progress is the college making in improving outcomes for learners on long courses and work-based learning across the provision? **Reasonable progress**

Overall success rates for long courses declined slightly in 2010/11 to just above the national average. Success rates in seven of the subject areas improved, with rates in five areas now above average. For both age groups, success rates improved at foundation and intermediate levels, and at advanced level for adults. Success rates at foundation level are significantly above national averages. However, rates at advanced level for students aged 16 to 18 decreased to below national averages, primarily due to a decline in retention. In the current year, the college has implemented improved progress tracking systems and timely interventions for underperforming students. College data, available at the time of the inspection visit, indicate that retention rates for advanced courses have increased significantly, and that the rate overall will be above the 2010/11 national average.

Overall success rates on work-based learning courses and the rates at which learners achieve on time have improved steadily year on year to just above national averages.

In-year data for 2011/12 indicate that rates for apprentices show a further improvement in the proportion of learners successfully completing all the requirements of frameworks. However, rates for adults in work-based learning declined in 2010/11, which is due mainly to staff problems on one large programme. Senior managers have since taken appropriate actions to rectify the problem.

What progress has the college made to improve success rates in functional skills and short courses?

Reasonable progress

Success rates for functional skills remained low in 2010/11. A small rise at foundation level was balanced by a small decline at intermediate level. In the current year, senior managers have clarified the responsibilities and accountability of departments for embedding functional skills effectively in their courses and improving outcomes. They have improved systems for monitoring the progress of functional skills within the departments to ensure that apposite interventions can be made in a more timely manner if necessary. Students are now enrolled at a level more appropriate to their abilities and staff adhere more closely to the agreed assessment schedule. College data suggest that retention and achievements to date are well above those at a similar time in the previous year, and that success rates overall will be significantly higher.

Short course success rates for students aged 16 to 18 declined in 2010/11 to below national averages due mainly to poor management of mainstream additional courses. The college has since taken appropriate actions to alleviate these problems. College data for retention and achievements in the current year indicate that success rates will improve significantly for 2011/12.

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