

Adult College for Rural East Sussex (ACRES)

Focused monitoring visit report

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

The Adult College for Rural East Sussex (ACRES) was established in 2005 from a consortium of East Sussex Community Colleges. Its main administrative centre is in Uckfield. It offers adult and community learning in several subject areas including information and communication technology (ICT), sport, leisure and recreation, visual arts, languages and Skills for Life. Courses are held in community colleges and venues across inland rural areas of East Sussex for learners' personal and social development and for qualifications. In 2010/11, ACRES enrolled almost 1,200 learners onto its provision.

At its previous inspection in January 2010, the overall effectiveness of ACRES' provision was satisfactory. Outcomes for learners, the quality of provision, leadership and management, safeguarding and equality and diversity were also satisfactory. Learning for qualifications in literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) was good, and community learning for social and personal development was satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has ACRES made in implementing a programme of self-assessment based on analysis of data and information gleaned from quality monitoring? How effective is this in preparing targets and plans for improvement? How well are its improvement plans implemented? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous inspection, ACRES had not analysed its teaching and learning to identify areas for improvement and data were not used fully in monitoring key performance areas or in self-assessment.

Since the inspection, ACRES has strengthened its processes for monitoring and improving the quality of teaching and learning and improved its collection and use of data. Senior managers now use monthly update meetings with curriculum managers to monitor key activities such as the observation of teaching and learning and the implementation of its arrangements for recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA). Their checks on progress in implementing improvement plans are thorough and detailed and make effective use of a range of evidence, including data, observation reports and feedback from learners. Managers agree suitable targets for further improvement or development. They use these monitoring processes well to prepare curriculum self-assessments that are supported by evidence and revised each term to reflect progress in improving provision.

ACRES prepared for inspectors a helpful and evaluative position statement on provision as a whole. However, it does not routinely prepare similar termly self-assessment reports for provision as a whole, to provide a strategic overview of progress in improving the quality of provision.

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has ACRES made in implementing its RARPA process and in using data on outcomes to plan for, and secure, improvements in rates of success for learners? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous inspection, outcomes were satisfactory but the proportion of learners achieving qualifications on ICT and visual arts programmes was low. ACRES no longer offers these courses. The proportion of learners attaining qualifications on accredited courses rose in 2010/11 and is now above the national average for similar providers. Managers now use class visits to identify underperformance at an earlier stage and intervene appropriately if necessary.

ACRES' arrangements for RARPA for learners on non-accredited courses were insufficiently established at the last inspection. Managers have reviewed and improved these arrangements. They have enhanced ACRES' guidance to help tutors and learners assess and grade their progress and achievement. They check adherence to these processes more swiftly, through observation and well-considered sampling of records. Tutors have been given further training, resulting in improvements and greater enthusiasm for completing paperwork. In the better learning plans, learners identify suitable and highly individual learning objectives and they track their progress well. Managers and staff now have much more confidence in the reliability of ACRES' data, which show that success rates on non-accredited courses rose last year to 87%. However, inconsistencies remain and some learners have insufficiently individual learning objectives.

Quality of provision

How much progress has ACRES made in improving curriculum planning and developing progression pathways to enable learners to progress their studies, either at ACRES or at other providers? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous inspection, ACRES offered too few progression opportunities for learners and learners had no clear understanding of the progression pathways available to them.

Since the inspection, ACRES has carried out a successful pilot to plan its languages curriculum to address this area for improvement. Recruitment to these courses has improved, learners have progressed to higher levels and, for the first time in several years, a small number of learners are taking GCSE qualifications in Spanish this year. The pilot is to be extended to other curriculum areas.

ACRES pays suitable attention to national and local priorities in planning its curriculum offer, and makes appropriate use of local knowledge to help ensure its courses are accessible to those most in need. Managers pay closer attention to the recruitment of men and ACRES has been successful in improving the proportion of men who participate by four percentage points, to 25%. It has begun to collect data on learners' progression. Tutors now make better use of learners' diaries to identify learners' next steps in the subject. However, they provide insufficient information on where learners might get further information on these steps.

How much progress has ACRES made in improving the quality of teaching and learning through tutor observations and professional development? **Reasonable progress**

Teaching and learning were satisfactory at the previous inspection but tutors made insufficient use of information and learning technology (ILT) and paid insufficient attention to meeting the individual needs of learners in lessons.

Since the inspection, ACRES has improved its lesson observation processes, linking them more closely to tutors' performance management and strengthening the quality of feedback given. Its tutor development has focused clearly on improving teaching and learning. It has given tutors helpful practical guidance on using ILT, differentiating learning activities and promoting diversity in lessons. In 2011/12, its pilot coaching and mentoring scheme provided approximately 15% of its tutors with a more focused action plan for improvement, which was followed up at their next observation. This successfully improved tutors' observation grades to good or outstanding and helped ACRES to retain tutors.

Managers are at an early stage of evaluating the impact of these initiatives for ACRES overall. Their observations show that tutors have improved their use of ILT and now pay more attention to meeting the individual needs of learners in lessons. However, a minority of those tutors graded as good have insufficient guidance to help them maintain or raise the standard of their teaching.

Leadership and management

How much progress has ACRES made in using data to monitor and evaluate provision and set targets for improvement? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous inspection, ACRES' data were incomplete and ACRES did not analyse or make sufficient use of data to monitor or evaluate performance.

ACRES has since improved its systems for collecting and analysing data and has made data more accessible to managers and staff. They now, routinely, use very detailed reports on outcomes for learners, on their progression, and on the performance of different groups. Staff understanding of the value and use of data is much improved.

Managers make effective use of data to monitor the performance of staff, identify underperformance and take action to improve. They are now more confident about analysing data in detail and use it well to identify areas for improvement at course or individual learner level. They intervene or set appropriate targets for improvement. Managers make effective use of data to monitor performance in different curriculum areas at their monthly update meetings. They make effective use of data on enrolments and progression to help plan changes to the curriculum. However, much of ACRES' data collection and analysis have not yet taken place over a sufficiently long period to provide ACRES with clear information on trends over time.

How much progress has ACRES made in managing and deploying staff, and in improving the availability of accommodation, to ensure that it minimises cancellations in classes?

Reasonable progress

Previously, ACRES had insufficient flexibility in staff contracts and in the availability of teaching accommodation to allow cover for tutor absence and to avoid the cancellation of courses. Since the last inspection, managers have strengthened processes for the risk assessment of venues to identify concerns about accommodation. They now plan accommodation and resources to meet curriculum needs at the start of each year and share information about venues, their capacity and facilities more widely. ACRES has purchased portable heaters, arranged for rooms to be available to tutors before lessons and negotiated additional storage facilities to address concerns about specific venues.

When planning courses in 2011/12, managers took care to consider the impact of new tutor appointments and the allocation of multiple courses to individual tutors in order to help minimise course cancellations. As a result, the proportion of cancelled courses due to tutor unavailability has more than halved, to 3%. Managers have increased the number of tutors who can teach more than one subject to give ACRES greater flexibility in providing cover and to build capacity for future provision. ACRES has negotiated new tutor contracts with East Sussex County Council, but progress has been slow. These contracts are due to be introduced for September 2012.

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