

Stafford College

Re-inspection monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: General further education college

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RE-INSPECTION MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Stafford College is a large college serving the town and a large part of mid and south Staffordshire. The college offers work-based, vocational and general education courses from foundation to higher-education level. The college is a member of the Stafford Collegiate, a partnership with local secondary schools, but has ceased to offer GCE A- and AS-level provision from September 2012. The majority of students are aged 16 to 18 and study full time.

The college was inspected in April 2012 and was judged as inadequate in its overall effectiveness. Outcomes for learners, leadership and management and the subject area of foundations for learning and life were judged as inadequate. The judgements for the quality of provision and the subject area of business administration and law were satisfactory. Provision in hairdressing and beauty therapy was judged as good. During this monitoring visit inspectors considered six themes based on areas for improvement identified at the inspection.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has been made in increasing the rigour and accuracy of self-assessment and in ensuring that improvement plans include challenging targets?	Reasonable progress
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Managers have strengthened self-assessment processes by ensuring that data are evaluated effectively, including by making appropriate comparisons with averages in similar colleges to ensure greater rigour in making judgements. Different student groups' performance, including their attendance and results in functional skills qualifications, is evaluated thoroughly. The production of self-assessment reports and actions plans is timely. The draft 2011/12 self-assessment report contains a considerable amount of useful analysis but, in places, there is too much narrative. As a result, the main judgements are not always easily identifiable. The proposed grade for outcomes in work-based learning provision does not take sufficient account of issues related to apprentices' timely completion of their qualifications.

The post-inspection action plan is sharply focused on relevant priorities. It is being used well to bring about improvement in the short timescale since inspection. Senior managers scrutinise action plans closely and hold middle and course managers to account regularly for successful completion of actions. Likewise, governors meet regularly to monitor senior managers' progress in implementing the post inspection action plan. Challenging targets are in place over a three-year period at faculty and whole college level with realistic interim targets, which are working well to drive improvement.

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has been made in raising success rates and improving outcomes for students in both classroom-based learning and employment-based learning? **Reasonable progress**

Provisional college-generated data for 2011/12 show that long course success rates increased overall and at all levels of study. The targets set in the post-inspection action plan for 2011/12 are met or exceeded. The gap between the college's success rate and the average rate in similar colleges is closing. The increase in the success rate at advanced level is substantial; however, this rate remains below average, particularly for younger students because of their below average retention.

Students' results in functional skills qualifications and their achievement of good passes in GCSE mathematics improved well in 2011/12 from a previously low baseline. Students' attendance increased in 2011/12 and rates are high in several subject areas. The success rate for looked after children is high. The achievement gap at advanced level between male and female students remains too wide although actions taken in 2011/12 reduced the gap slightly compared to the previous year.

Apprentices' success rates did not increase in 2011/12 and too many apprentices fail to achieve their qualifications within the planned time. The much smaller number of other work-based students, mainly on NVQ courses, achieve very well. Students' progression between levels of study is high and has increased. The proportion of students moving into employment on leaving college has increased markedly.

The monitoring of students' progress, particularly by senior managers, is much more rigorous than previously. Carefully considered customised data reports are starting to be used to monitor the main performance indicators on a monthly basis. Accountability for monitoring progress and meeting targets for students' performance is explicit within managers' responsibilities.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

What progress has been made in improving teaching, learning and assessment including through the use of the lesson observation scheme? **Reasonable progress**

Since the inspection, substantial and largely successful revisions to the observation of teaching and learning scheme have taken place. This has helped to increase the rigour and accuracy of evaluating teachers' practice and to provide a sound and reliable basis for developing teachers' practice. The team of observers has been reduced in size to promote consistency, and has benefited from recent training and guidance from highly experienced observers. The importance of developing English and mathematics through teaching and learning across subject areas is rightly

emphasised. Moderation of lesson observation records is mostly thorough; however, in a few cases, development points identified post-observation are insufficiently specific. The link between action points and relevant staff development activities remains strong. The number of training opportunities has increased through instigating regular short sessions on relevant topics linked to the emerging issues from lesson observations. The outcomes from lesson observations are used effectively in managing the performance of teachers.

Support and guidance for teachers to improve their use of formative assessment are good. Teachers are increasingly incorporating strategies that challenge students to achieve their full potential and help them develop English and mathematical skills. However, sometimes teachers do not pursue these strategies fully and they help students too much. Teachers' correction of students' spelling, grammar and punctuation is often incomplete.

How much progress has been made in improving the effectiveness of provision in the subject area of foundations for learning and life?

Reasonable progress

Managers have successfully raised the profile of functional skills with staff and students. A clear strategy for the delivery of functional skills is now in place and followed up with appropriate staff training. Tutors systematically check on students' progress in functional skills during tutorials. Helpful information about functional skills is included in the prospectus. In 2011/12, the overall success rate for functional skills qualifications exceeded the interim target set but remains below average. Rates are highest at foundation level and in mathematics.

Managers' actions for further improvement include ensuring specialist staff are used to teach functional skills lessons and using dedicated, refurbished accommodation for teaching English, mathematics and discrete functional skills lessons. Managers monitor data, including attendance, fortnightly and they identify and respond rapidly to underperformance. In-year data indicate higher attendance at functional skills lessons than in the previous year.

Teaching, learning and assessment require improvement to ensure that all lessons are interesting, lively and provide sufficient challenge for students. Frequent lesson observations are helping teachers to improve. However, in a few cases, the resulting actions plans are insufficiently detailed limiting the potential for rapid improvement.

What progress has been made in developing the curriculum, particularly at advanced level and to enable students to improve their English, mathematics and functional skills? **Reasonable progress**

Managers are implementing well-considered revisions to the advanced level curriculum. College-based GCE A- and AS- level provision is no longer offered but the college's work within the Stafford Collegiate remains strong, ensuring that this provision is provided across the locality. One year vocational courses have replaced two-year courses in order to increase students' opportunities for accreditation and to motivate them to complete and succeed on their courses. Managers insist on close adherence to entry requirements to ensure students have the best possible chance of success. Apprenticeship provision has been substantially increased through making productive use of links with employers. Management of several aspects of this provision has been strengthened considerably.

Good development of the functional skills curriculum includes devising and implementing a strategy for English and mathematics development. This strategy is mainly focused on the subject area of foundations for learning and life and is less well focused on development across the whole college provision.

A two week induction period, with an associated qualification aim, helps to ensure that students are on the right course and well-prepared for their programme of study. The introduction of a wide range of relevant additional qualifications tailored to specific subject areas' requirements supports the development of students' employability skills and increases their chances of progression.

How much progress has been made in providing support for students at risk of underperformance including through the provision of additional support and intervention? **Reasonable progress**

Managers have implemented fully the arrangements to identify students at risk and they intervene promptly. Review days in the autumn and spring term, known as 'stay-days', set up specifically to support students at risk of falling behind in their studies or leaving their programmes early, are well-established and proving effective in increasing retention. For example, in 2011/12, in the subject area of foundations for learning and life, almost all students identified as at risk successfully passed their qualification.

Catch-up sessions or workshops, including with the support of specialist staff, are in place in most subject areas to help students at risk to stay on track in completing their work. Overall, students who receive additional learning support have higher success rates than their peers. However, support for literacy is much more successful in helping them achieve than numeracy support. The provision of a high level of support early in the autumn term is notable as all courses below intermediate level

receive five hours of an additional support worker's time in each of the first five weeks of term. Teachers produce electronic group profiles, which identify students' learning needs, in order to help plan lessons and in-class support. However, the effectiveness of these profiles varies too much and, in some cases, the information is limited and insufficiently helpful.

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