

Stockport College

Follow up re-inspection monitoring visit report

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Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

This is the second follow up re-inspection monitoring visit to Stockport College following their inspection in October 2013 which found the provider to be inadequate overall. The areas for improvement were: the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; success rates and learners' progress; the rigour of quality assurance; and accommodation and resources. Foundation English and mathematics and business studies were judged to be inadequate and other subject areas inspected were judged to require improvement, apart from teacher training, which was good.

The first monitoring visit took place towards the end of November 2013. It found a number of weaknesses in the post-inspection action plan and recommended that urgent action was needed on a number of issues.

A new Acting Principal took up post just before the second monitoring visit. The themes and findings of this visit are outlined below.

Themes

What progress has the college made in developing and implementing a robust action plan in response to weaknesses identified at inspection?

Reasonable improvement for learners

Following the initial monitoring visit in November, the college redrafted the action plan, which has now been approved by the Skills Funding Agency. Further work is needed to ensure progress measures indicate clearly how the college will know that actions taken are successful in bringing about rapid improvement in the learners' experience. For example, the most recent update of the plan records the allocation of hours to course tutors as an action completed, rather than measuring the impact of this on issues such as the retention of learners on their course. Another example is where it records as successfully achieved the completion of diagnostic assessments of learners' needs and the fact that teachers receive this information. It does not focus sufficiently on the key point of how well teachers use this information to plan lessons.

The lengthy action plan is now backed by a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) and managers use a red/amber/green coding to track progress on a monthly basis. However, the list of KPIs is lengthy, they are not prioritised and do not differentiate between things that can be measured quantitatively on a monthly basis and other indicators. This limits the usefulness of the KPIs as a key monitoring tool.

Despite these limitations to the action plan, managers have taken swift and effective action since the last monitoring visit to improve key weaknesses, such as the lack of

professional standards and inadequate monitoring of teaching and learning. Inspectors found a much improved situation in both these important areas.

What progress has the college made in bringing about improvements in teaching and learning?

Reasonable improvement for learners

The system for monitoring teaching and learning is now much more robust and is starting to bring about improvements. The creation of a smaller team of college managers who observe lessons has brought about greater consistency in their judgements. Lesson observations are unannounced and backed up by regular short visits to lessons to gain a clearer picture of the learners' daily experience. The college targeted initial observations on subjects of most concern, which led to focused staff development, backed up by strengthened capability procedures where necessary. A number of teachers have improved their lessons as a result. Records of observations have a better focus on evidence that shows learners' progress over time, not just in the specific lesson observed. They also focus more on the quality of the learning environment.

During the visit inspectors found an increased proportion of effectively planned and delivered lessons compared with the previous low base. Learners' attitudes are better, and they show more respect; the relationship between staff and students is generally good. Information and learning technology is more reliable and used well by an increasing number of teachers. However, areas of weakness remain. Teachers use praise to motivate learners but do not challenge them enough to reach their full potential. Questions to check understanding do not probe enough, teachers over-prompt learners and do not always make them work hard enough. Where learners are asked to complete tasks in groups, some staff need more training on how to ensure effective learning is taking place. Teachers do not consistently use apprentices' experience in the workplace in planning off-the-job lessons.

Assessments of learners' work are carried out more regularly and the quality of marking has improved. However, some staff continue to insert corrections without guiding the learner to carry out further work to ensure they fully understand the topic or what they need to do to improve. Inspectors still found examples of teachers accepting poor quality work from learners, and not enough urgency with learners who fail to submit work on time.

Learners' attendance has improved since the inspection but is still not good enough. A major improvement is the speed at which learners with very low attendance are identified and these learners receive a lot of intervention and support. Follow up is not as consistent for learners who do not fall into this category but whose attendance could be improved further.

To what extent has the college improved student target setting and progress monitoring?

Reasonable improvement for learners

Inspectors found improvements in setting challenging targets in practical areas such as hairdressing and joinery. These are based on professional standards found in the industry. However, in theory lessons they found examples of activities set at too low a level for the course. Within the apprenticeship programme target setting and reviews of trainees' progress has improved considerably. Regular and more rigorous reviews ensure that targets are amended to take into account progress made.

Staff training on the use of value added measures has helped teachers to set challenging targets for learners on AS- and A-level courses. Across the college learners are more aware of their targets and progress. Tracking sheets on the walls in some curriculum areas enable learners to see at a glance the extent of their progress. However, staff do not share sufficiently examples of good practice in target setting and progress monitoring. For example, on BTEC courses inspectors found examples where staff do not sufficiently raise learners' expectations of achieving more than a pass.

The work of the intervention team is helping to track better the progress of learners at risk of under-achieving or leaving the college before the end of their programmes. However, learners who have fallen behind and are receiving extra support need clearer guidelines on the higher expectations now in place and the timelines in terms of consequences if they fail to improve.

What progress has the college made to improve the provision of English and mathematics for learners?

Reasonable improvement for learners

The organisation of English and mathematics classes has improved since the previous monitoring visit. For example, a pre-GCSE course has been organised for learners not ready to take the examination this year. Most functional skills classes now have learners working at similar levels. However, a small number of classes remain where learners work across a wide range of levels and these are less successful. In one class observed, learners working towards level 2 were working below the level they are capable of, while learners at entry level struggled to understand the work.

The standard of teaching and learning has improved in most classes as a result of staff training and teachers are meeting more frequently to share good practice. An area for further improvement is the extent to which teachers plan for individual skill development in lessons, rather than providing the same tasks for the whole class.

In functional skills lessons, teachers are now better at contextualising work to the relevant vocational area. For example, in one session, learners used job roles from different industries such as media and engineering to carry out a writing task on future career plans. The college needs to evaluate carefully the pilot in motor vehicle

courses where functional skills are fully integrated within the vocational area. This has strengths in terms of motivating learners, but not enough attention is paid to learners developing an understanding of transferable skills and to planning lessons that take into account differences in what each learner already understands. Within the apprenticeship programme, trainees do not complete functional skills work sufficiently early, which hampers their overall achievement.

In vocational lessons, not all teachers routinely correct English mistakes in lessons, particularly spelling. Dictionaries are now widely available in lessons but are not always used.

How much progress has been made in developing a culture of high expectations and more rigorous performance management?

Reasonable improvement for learners

Managers acted promptly on areas identified to be in need of urgent action at the previous visit. The college is much cleaner and a planned programme of redecoration and refurbishment has started. Refurbishment in some curriculum areas, notably hairdressing, has helped to bring about a more professional approach to behaviour in class. Displays on walls create a more stimulating learning environment. Registers are marked in line with college policy and attendance is monitored better. Managers are more visible at the start of the day and at break times to check that learners arrive at lessons on time. A manager has been allocated to each area of the college to carry out random checks on the learning environment and the purposefulness of learners' work. Professional standards are being promoted more effectively and the majority of learners are responding well. Further work is needed to build on this, for example where learners now wear appropriate dress in hairdressing but not appropriate footwear. Classroom temperatures vary too much across the college, and a few rooms are too hot to be conducive to learning.

Managers now take action more promptly to follow up lack of compliance or under-performance. Some staff have left and others are being supported to improve. The new Acting Principal has sent messages to individual staff reinforcing where improvement is needed, but also praising good practice in the college.

The governing body is committed to bringing about improvement and governors have increased their ability to monitor the college by the appointment of new members with educational experience. The governing body is also receiving support from external agencies. The information governors receive is better but still requires further improvement to ensure they can identify key issues in a timely manner and avoid a repeat of recent situations such as sudden and unexpected changes to income forecasts. Governors are working with the new Acting Principal to sharpen the KPIs they now use as part of their monthly monitoring meetings. The targets for senior leaders are currently too descriptive and need to be linked more explicitly to the KPIs.

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