

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 third follow-up re-inspection monitoring visit to Stockport College following their inspection in October 2013, which found the provider to be inadequate. 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; 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 several issues.

A new Acting Principal took up post just before the second monitoring visit in February 2014. The second visit found reasonable improvement for learners, particularly in terms of a cleaner and more professional learning environment. Teaching and learning, provision in English and mathematics and performance management showed reasonable improvement but weaknesses remained in each of these areas.

The themes and findings of this visit are outlined below.

Themes

How successful is the post-inspection action plan in bringing about improvements for learners?

Insufficient improvement for learners

The action plan has introduced a number of systems to address issues identified at the inspection, but this has not brought about sufficient impact in the last few months on the experience of learners. The main improvements are in the standard of the learning environment and the effect of the 'back-to-basics' campaign to implement professional standards in the classroom. However, there are still examples of learners arriving to class without basic equipment such as pens and paper, and not demonstrating a readiness to learn. Teaching and learning show limited improvement from the last visit; although teaching and learning are no longer inadequate, there are still too many lessons that require improvement.

Since the last visit, further incentives have been put in place to encourage students' regular attendance. For example, the fresh

start rewards system introduced after Easter is valued by many learners. Increased discussion takes place with parents over poor attendance. These initiatives have led to an improvement in attendance for some learners, but low attendance is still a problem in a number of lessons. The lowest attendance is among learners on courses at level one. Through strategies to reinforce employability skills, most learners recognise the importance of arriving punctually to lessons and are respectful in arriving on time. However, lateness after breaks and at the start of lessons is still occurring and, where this happens, tutors do not always deal with it in an appropriate or consistent way.

Retention of learners remains an issue and is currently below the 2012/13 rate. Managers expect that achievement rates on college-based courses will be higher this year. However, at this very late stage in the academic year too many students still have a significant amount of their vocational portfolios to complete. The predicted apprenticeship success rates indicate a reliable improvement on the very low rates in 2012/13.

What further progress has the college made in bringing about improvements in teaching, learning and assessment since the last visit and how robust is the college's judgement on this?

Reasonable improvement for learners

Evidence from the visit supports the college's judgement that teaching, learning and assessment are no longer inadequate but still require improvement. When the college's observers judge lessons to be inadequate, managers now take action swiftly to ensure improvement and to put in place alternative arrangements for learners. All staff have received training on how to improve teaching and learning. Staff development includes useful hints and tips for effective lessons but this is not always followed up by managers to ensure that teachers are taking action quickly to improve learners' day-to-day experience. Good practice in lesson planning is not yet shared sufficiently across the college. Many teachers are trying out learning strategies from the training they receive but some are more skilful than others in making sure that all learners progress to their full potential. For example, where learners are working in groups, teachers now allocate specific tasks more often, but some learners are still letting others do most of the work. Most teachers now direct questions to individual learners rather than the whole class to check their understanding, but they do not always push learners enough to extend their answers and show deeper understanding, especially on advanced-level courses.

Inspectors found good practice in lessons where teachers planned carefully to meet the needs of different learners in the group. These lessons use carefully designed activities that structure learning, build on previous knowledge and provide good opportunities to assess learners' progress. However, there are still too many lessons where activities are not always challenging enough and the pace of learning is too slow.

Tracking of learners' progress has improved and the senior leadership team recognises the importance of these last few weeks of the academic year in ensuring that learners complete all their work. Managers must ensure that all teachers make a concerted effort towards successful portfolio completion before the end of the summer term. Learners are benefiting from additional workshops, and in some cases extra staffing, to help them with assessments in order to ensure that they achieve their qualifications. In some subjects, teachers motivate students well to complete tasks to meet high grade criteria where appropriate, but this is not consistent across the college. Tracking data at this stage do not give sufficient confidence that learners in all curriculum areas will complete work and achieve their qualification.

On apprenticeship programmes, assessors are monitoring learners' progress more closely through reviews that often contain specific targets of what trainees need to do by the next review date. However, this is not yet consistent and review documentation does not always identify key points for learners and employers to ensure achievement within the planned time.

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

Teachers in vocational areas demonstrate an improved awareness of the importance of promoting English and mathematics skills in their lessons. As a result, learners gain more opportunities to check their knowledge and practise these skills. Posters display key words and the spelling of technical terms is given more prominence. Teachers pay more attention to spelling when marking assignments.

In GCSE and functional skills English and mathematics classes, teaching and learning have improved, but poor practice still exists, particularly in mathematics functional skills lessons. Even where good teaching takes place, progress is marred by poor attendance in too many lessons. The college's data show that this, and poor organisation of the provision at the start of the year, means that success rates are unlikely to improve much in the current year.

For learners on apprenticeship programmes, the development of

Insufficient improvement for learners

functional skills continues to be an area for improvement. These skills are not taught sufficiently early in the programme and employers are not always committed to ensuring that their apprentices achieve these aspects of the framework. Too many apprentices do not pass functional skills examinations despite the additional support that has been put in place.

Is performance management by senior leaders and governors now sufficiently robust to drive improvements in outcomes for learners?

Insufficient improvement for learners

Since the last visit, a smaller and refocused middle management group has been allocated responsibility for specific curriculum areas in an effort to strengthen performance management. These managers have reviewed the performance of subjects in their areas quickly, and the priorities that they have identified show that they have a good understanding of actions that need to be taken. Communication among staff in subject areas and between staff and the senior team is improving. For example the Acting Principal holds regular meetings with groups of staff. However, the new curriculum leaders have not been in post long enough to bring about sufficient change. There is an urgent need in the next few weeks to focus closely on ensuring that learners catch up on work where necessary and complete all assignments needed to gain their qualification.

The remuneration committee of the governing board is aware that the process and interim arrangements for setting performance targets for senior postholders are not good enough. The committee is currently reviewing target-setting and appraisal arrangements.

Governors receive regular reports against revised key performance indicators that have been put in place since the last visit. However, the level of governors' challenge in interrogating this information is still an area for improvement. The board has carried out a skills audit and undertaken work on self-assessment but there has not yet been a full review of how effective this has been. This is of crucial importance at a time when the college is facing significant challenges, including financial issues that are likely to lead to further staff and management restructuring. The board has confidence in the openness of the Acting Principal to bring to their attention important matters affecting the college. Efforts to strengthen performance management have led to the identification of further issues facing the college since the inspection. A systemic cultural lack of accountability and issues of poor practice in the college mean that actions put in place to make improvements are taking too long to have an impact.

The governing body needs to ensure that appropriate checks and balances are carried out on the data it receives to help them gauge their reliability and whether targets are sufficiently challenging. For example, one of the key performance indicators approved by the board is that 75% of learners should achieve target grades. It was not clear to all board members that this was a minimum target grade, which calls into question its level of challenge. It was also unclear how managers will measure and report on progress towards this target.

The college recognises that data underpinning its monitoring reports have not been sufficiently robust. For example, in recent weeks work has taken place to ensure that learners who have not attended for some time are withdrawn from registers and not counted as retained learners. This has lowered retention rates. New curriculum managers are carrying out further checks on the data for their areas to remove any further inaccuracies.

How well planned are proposed curriculum changes to meet the needs of learners better?

Reasonable improvement for learners

A major curriculum restructure is taking place for the academic year 2014/15, partly to ensure clarity in the progression routes for learners. Currently, there is duplication in some of the courses on offer and they do not all match well to the needs of the local labour market. The proposed curriculum gives a clearer structure to inform learners of their choices and is better matched to intelligence about local economic demands.

Improvements are also taking place in information, advice and guidance for learners. Too often in the past learners have been accepted onto courses without sufficient guidance and, in some cases, this has limited their achievement and progression. Learners interested in enrolling next year are currently receiving individual interviews and assessments designed to match them better to the most appropriate provision.

The Acting Principal is working in partnership with other providers in the area in rationalising the curriculum. The college will now focus solely on vocational provision. Arrangements are in place to ensure that learners currently taking AS courses will be able to complete their A-level programme next year.

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