

Coventry College

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Coventry College is a large further education college serving the communities of Coventry and Warwickshire. The college was formed on 1 August 2017, following the merger of City College Coventry with Henley College Coventry. Both colleges required improvement at their previous full inspections. The themes for this monitoring visit were selected from the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection reports.

The college has two main sites: the Henley Campus, located in the north east of Coventry, and the City Campus, located in central Coventry. Courses available at the college include study programmes, adult learning programmes, courses for learners with high needs, and apprenticeships. The majority of learners study vocational qualifications.

The city of Coventry has a population of some 360,000. Service industries provide the main source of employment, including business services, education, public administration, and health services. Engineering and manufacturing companies are also significant employers across the city. The proportion of people in Coventry aged 16 and over with qualifications at NVQ 3 and above is higher than for the West Midlands, but lower than that reported nationally.

Themes

What progress are governors making in holding leaders and managers to account for sharply focused and challenging targets for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment? Reasonable progress

Governors and leaders are at an early stage of beginning to effect a positive change in expectations among staff, including taking effective action to raise standards and performance. They are successfully working with the recently appointed principal and the new senior leadership team to implement a carefully considered strategy for improving all aspects of the college's work. Governors ensure that leaders and senior managers have a precise understanding of their responsibilities and accountabilities for raising standards, including the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

Governors, along with leaders and managers, are starting to become more self-critical regarding the impact of initiatives designed to improve provision and the extent to which this impact is visible in consistent improvement across the college. For example, as a result of the improvement actions taken in-year by leaders and managers, the proportion of learners aged 16 to 18 who are projected to achieve their main qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 3 in 2017/18 is forecast to rise. Similarly, the number of adult learners at level 3 who are on target to gain their qualifications is also projected to improve. However, other quality improvement actions introduced

by leaders and overseen by governors have not yet secured consistent college-wide progress.

Following the recruitment of an experienced chair of corporation in January 2018, a detailed review of governance arrangements was promptly undertaken. This resulted in the membership of the board being further strengthened through the careful identification and targeted recruitment of additional governors with specific expertise in a range of areas. These include further and higher education, legal, commercial and financial, as well as human resources management. Governors are suitably qualified and experienced professionals.

Governors have organised themselves appropriately through a main board and sub-committee structure to serve the best interests of the college and its learners. They confidently use their collective expertise and skills to support and challenge senior leaders through increased levels of monitoring and deeper scrutiny of the financial and educational performance reports presented to them.

Where necessary, governors ask for more pertinent information to aid their understanding and analysis of the college and its performance. For example, at the March 2018 standards committee meeting, governors challenged leaders regarding their predictive success rates for English and mathematics, which they considered were overly optimistic. They requested that the report be represented with a clearer explanation of the underlying rationale and assumptions on which leaders and managers were basing their forecasts. Similarly, as a result of concerns identified regarding the low projected success rates for apprenticeship programmes, governors promptly established an apprenticeship monitoring sub-committee. This meets twice each term to monitor closely the effectiveness of managers' actions to improve standards and performance across all apprenticeship programmes.

Governors have an up-to-date level of knowledge and understanding of learners' outcomes on individual courses and of the reasons for weak performance identified over the past year. They closely monitor the impact of actions to accelerate the rate of improvement across the college through termly scrutiny of progress against the key performance targets detailed in the college's quality improvement plan. However, it is too early to assess the full impact of current and planned quality improvement initiatives.

What progress are leaders and managers making in ensuring that teachers and assessors reflect on, and are supported to improve, their teaching practices, so that learners and apprentices routinely benefit from challenging learning? Reasonable progress

Leaders have strengthened during the last academic year arrangements for evaluating and improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Following the merger, leaders prioritised investment in a new cross-college management structure to strengthen quality and improve standards. This included the

appointment of a new head of teaching, learning and assessment, and the appointment of 10 new teaching coaches. Leaders now ensure that the large majority of teachers and assessors reflect on their teaching practices and engage in appropriate staff development activities to strengthen and improve their classroom practice and performance.

Staff now routinely benefit from a wide range of well-organised development and training activities to improve and hone the quality of their teaching, learning and assessment practices. As a result, an increasing proportion of teachers and assessors are becoming more skilled in using their experience and expertise to create purposeful activities that interest and enthuse learners. Learners respond well to improvements in the quality of the classroom practice they receive. They acquire the confidence to perform complex tasks at an early stage and to develop an inquisitive attitude to learning.

Teaching staff whose performance is not at the required standard benefit from targeted intervention and close support from teaching coaches, who set challenging improvement targets and monitor progress closely. Where teachers and assessors do not improve following planned intervention and targeted support, leaders and managers take swift action to remove poor practice where it persists.

Leaders and managers have successfully initiated a range of improvements, including well-considered changes in curriculum management, to strengthen the quality of vocational teaching, learning and assessment – particularly for learners aged 16 to 18 on study programmes. However, leaders and managers acknowledge that further improvements are still required to narrow the wide disparities in performance between subject areas and for different types of learners – particularly for adults and apprentices.

Managers' use of revised quality assurance systems – including curriculum improvement reviews, ungraded lesson observations, quality intervention meetings and intensive support for courses requiring additional improvement – now provides leaders with more insightful information on learners, their outcomes, and the quality of teaching they receive than was the case previously.

What progress have leaders and managers made in implementing a strategy for improving the teaching of English and mathematics across all curriculum areas and levels of study? Insufficient progress

Leaders have not yet been successful in ensuring that teachers and assessors routinely develop and extend learners' vocational and academic English and mathematics skills. Following the merger, managers and teachers did not use student tracking systems well enough to identify learners or apprentices who were not making secure progress in developing these skills. They did not take effective management action where progress was not in line with expectations.

Teachers' assessment of adult learners' and apprentices' skills in English and mathematics is not accurate enough; as a result, too few learners and apprentices achieve in line with their identified potential. Based on the college's own data for 2017/18, the proportion of learners aged 16 to 19 on classroom-based programmes who successfully achieved qualifications in basic English and mathematics skills is anticipated to be high and similar to that reported pre-merger. In contrast, achievement rates for adult learners in basic English and mathematics is projected to remain low. Similarly, too few learners aged 16 to 18 and adult learners achieved high grades at GCSE in English and mathematics compared to their peers nationally. Learners' attendance at English and mathematics classes is too low and below the college's own internal target.

Leaders and governors give high priority to managers' actions to strengthen and rapidly improve teaching standards and the delivery of English and mathematics across the college. For example, they have established a new essential skills team, including a new head of faculty, and programme managers who are responsible for establishing common models of teaching and assessment for English and mathematics across all college campuses. While relatively new to post, programme leaders within the English and mathematics team have developed a well-informed improvement strategy to strengthen standards of teaching and learners' progress. They have also worked hard to include the development of English and mathematics skills within schemes of work for vocational teaching and learning as well as ensuring that each faculty benefits from dedicated English and mathematics specialists.

Leaders have taken prompt action to ensure that all learners and apprentices undertake an appropriate assessment in English and mathematics, including a free-writing assessment, to identify their starting points. In English, specialist staff have now established more informative tracking systems to monitor learners' skills and progress in reading, listening and speaking, and writing. However, these systems are relatively new and it is too early to judge their effectiveness.

Due to more rigorous and frequent observations of teachers' classroom practices, managers and recently appointed teaching coaches are correctly identifying weaknesses in how English and mathematics are taught. Managers ensure that relevant staff quickly receive appropriately targeted support. For example, as a result of planned staff development, teachers of mathematics GCSE have recently changed the way they teach ratios, percentages and fractions.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring teachers routinely make skilful and effective use of information on learners' and apprentices' prior learning and attainment to plan challenging learning? Insufficient progress

Since the college merger, leaders have overseen the introduction and development of revised cross-college learner and apprenticeship tracking systems. However, the extent of their implementation and the way college staff use them are still

inconsistent. As a result, information derived from these systems about learners' and apprentices' progress is not consistently informative or insightful. Internal college records indicate a minority of staff do not adhere to agreed college administrative processes and procedures regarding record-keeping. This impedes tutors' ability to prioritise support and to provide lessons that maximise attainment; it also hinders leaders' and managers' analyses of course standards and performance.

Scrutiny of learners' work records undertaken by inspectors across a sample of curriculum areas and at different levels of study highlighted inconsistencies in monitoring and tracking. For example, inspectors found incomplete individual learner plans detailing learners' progress over time and lack of evidence to inform the predicted target grade. Teachers and assessors have not closely monitored the progress of too many apprentices; as a result, the proportion who have left their course early without achieving has increased.

Teachers and assessors do not make consistently good use of available information about learners' and apprentices' starting points and their previous attainment when planning and providing learning. Similarly, the quality of feedback from tutors to learners and apprentices on their work varies significantly. Work sampled by inspectors during the monitoring visit indicated that a minority of tutors do not consistently provide learners and apprentices with useful feedback on what they do well and what they need to improve.

Leaders have accurately identified many of the areas for improvement highlighted by inspectors during the monitoring visit. These include inconsistencies in the information held on tracking systems and some staff non-compliance with college processes. They are at an early stage of introducing more challenging local accountability for performance across all curriculum management teams.

Targeted staff development linked to a change of emphasis away from 'minimum expectations' towards newly developed 'college professional standards' is starting to have a beneficial impact in helping some staff to understand what is expected of them. For example, in a level 3 lesson in games design the tutor took good account of learners' previous experience and challenged them to reflect on the visualisation and design skills they had developed and what they would need to do to complete their individual projects.

What progress are leaders and managers making in ensuring the curriculum of the merged college meets the needs of learners, employers and local and regional employment and skills priorities? Reasonable progress

Leaders and governors have contributed well to shaping the long-term plans for the merged college. They have skilfully used their good links with industry, business and the community to develop a sharply focused vision for the college and its curriculum.

The principal and senior leaders have established a range of beneficial links with a wide range of stakeholders including local schools, universities, employers, the local authority and Coventry and Warwickshire local enterprise partnership. These links ensure the college is strategically positioned as a key player in the economic and social development of the city.

At a regional level, the principal, with the active support of governors, has ensured that the college's strategic priorities and curriculum provision align closely with those of the West Midlands Combined Authority and their recently published skills plan. Senior leaders have ensured that the college is represented on, and collaborates with, other regional training providers in planning for the adoption and implementation of T-level qualifications from 2020. In addition, the college is a collaborative partner in an employer partnership aligned to regional skills priorities, including digital skills.

Managers maintain strong partnerships with local and regional employers and ensure that courses meet local needs. For example, at the point of merger, leaders made good use of labour market intelligence to plan for, and support, the introduction of new courses in access to education, and three new standards-based apprenticeships in response to identified local priorities and needs. Leaders have also successfully established a few employer-led expert panels to inform curriculum delivery at faculty level. However, not all curriculum areas have yet established such panels or developed concise plans for the introduction of new courses and qualification pathways.

Leaders have been quick to prioritise investment in upgrading facilities in automotive engineering for the benefit of learners and apprentices. The principal and governors are working closely with a range of local partners to secure new additional funding to support further enhancements to college facilities in creative performance and sport studies as part of Coventry's status as City of Culture in 2021.

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