

Chesterfield College

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Chesterfield College was inspected in February 2018. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in addressing the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

Chesterfield College is a large further education college operating from four locations in Chesterfield. It offers programmes from entry level through to higher education in all subject areas apart from agriculture, horticulture and animal care. A number of local schools provide competing post-16 provision and, although the attainment of 16-year-olds in Chesterfield is similar to the county as a whole, the college draws a disproportionate number of students from deprived backgrounds, and their average attainment is lower.

Themes

How much progress do 16 to 19 study programme students make?

Reasonable progress

The previous inspection took place at the mid-point of the 2017/18 academic year. Managers' efforts to improve outcomes for students who were already halfway through their studies had limited success. They delivered small improvements in the progress of students on level 3 applied general qualifications, and more substantial gains in outcomes for level 2 technical certificate students. However, outcomes for other level 2 students remained static and few A-level students achieved the grades of which they were capable.

Managers have continued to take a number of actions intended to improve the progress students make. They have avoided looking for 'quick wins' and instead have focused their attention on building sustainable foundations for improvements.

Managers place great emphasis on monitoring the progress of current students. All students have grade targets derived from their prior attainment, using a clearly understood formula. Staff formally assess students at five points during the year, and rate them based on the likelihood that they will achieve their target grades. The first round of these assessments suggests that students have started the year well but it is too early to predict how this will develop.

How good is the quality of teaching and learning on 16 to 19 study programmes? Insufficient progress

Teachers' expectations of what their students can achieve remain too low and, in a few lessons, far too low. As a result, too many lessons lack pace and challenge. Teachers ask questions that do not require students to think deeply. Students need only the most superficial knowledge to answer them. On occasion, teachers use starter activities that are too simple and take up too much of the session.

In several of the observed lessons, teachers asked students to complete tasks for which they had not been prepared. Students in these lessons lacked the knowledge they needed to complete the activities and, consequently, spent their time engaged in what amounted to guesswork. In several lessons, some students lost interest for periods of time.

In the handful of better lessons seen, teachers provided clear explanations of topics. They placed learning activities in a logical sequence, both within the lesson and as part of a series of lessons. They used activities that aligned well with the intended purpose of the lesson. In these lessons, students behaved well, participated in group discussions and took careful notes. Teachers in these lessons were confident and used their expert knowledge well to link their lessons to the workplace.

How effectively have managers helped teachers to understand students' starting points and their potential? Reasonable progress

College staff now assess the existing skills and abilities of students when they start their courses. This begins during pre-enrolment interviews. Staff assess students' English and mathematics skills appropriately. Where relevant, they assess certain other abilities, such as the manual dexterity of potential hairdressers. The results of these assessments are included in detailed and thorough group profiles to which all teachers have access.

Managers have developed a set of expectations for the quality of teaching and learning, including how teachers meet the differing needs of each student. Teachers are clear about these expectations. They recognise the need to provide extra challenge for the most able students and can describe how they provide extension activities in lessons. They understand that these activities should provide greater difficulty rather than more of the same work. However, this is not yet fully embedded in their practice.

Teachers are less secure in their understanding of how they use information about students who may need extra help to be successful. They are unable to explain specific approaches that they use to support such students and cannot describe college-wide guidance.

How effective have professional development activities been for teachers? Insufficient progress

Leaders and managers launched 'The Chesterfield Way' over the summer. This initiative provides all staff with clear guidance on the expected standards for each stage of the student experience within the college. The Chesterfield Way defines professional values and aims to develop a culture of excellence for all staff so that the college can flourish.

Staff and external stakeholders were fully consulted in the development of 'The Chesterfield Way', and staff really value this involvement. They say that as a result, they have more clarity around leaders' and managers' expectations of them.

The focus on improving teaching, learning and assessment is at the heart of the college's strategy. There has been a whole-college professional development programme to help teachers increase the level of challenge within lessons. This training is mandatory and up to date, and four fifths of teaching staff have accessed it. However, the benefits of this training were not seen in the sample of lessons observed during this visit.

Leaders have put a lot of emphasis on each curriculum team taking control of its own professional development. Managers have access to a range of coaches and business partners, who support them to deliver regular training in their team meetings. While teachers value this support, and managers are able to describe some of the bespoke training activities, the impact of this activity is not yet evident. Inspectors were unable to identify improvements in the observed lessons.

Have managers improved quality assurance and performance management processes? Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have introduced a teaching, learning and assessment improvement strategy that focuses on, among other things, streamlining quality assurance processes and quality improvement activities. The 'Chesterfield Way' defines the professional and performance standards for curriculum delivery. The clarity both initiatives have brought is welcomed by teachers and managers.

The lesson observation process is more streamlined than at the previous inspection and lines of responsibility are much clearer. Managers have reduced the membership of the observation team, which now consists of the senior management team and curriculum operations managers (COMs) or equivalent. The useful training that all members of the observation team have received, along with 'buddy' support, is intended to aid consistency. Following observations, feedback to teachers involves a professional dialogue that is followed up quickly with an appropriate action plan. The new cycle of lesson observations has only just begun but early signs are that it is starting to have a positive effect.

COMs' responsibilities have been prioritised to allow them to spend more time in their curriculum areas and conduct regular visits to classrooms. In consultation with their business coach, they deal with any issues arising from these visits at weekly team meetings. Teaching, learning and assessment are regular agenda items at these meetings, along with bespoke training for teachers in the curriculum area. College leaders have invested heavily in the coaching system. Each coach works directly with up to three curriculum areas and has time set aside to support teachers. Teachers find the professional dialogue extremely helpful in reflecting on their teaching practice.

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