

USP College

Monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 130681

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Inspection date(s): 5–6 June 2019

Type of provider: General further education college

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

In August 2017, Seevic College merged with Palmer's College. The newly merged college is named USP College, and leaders have retained the previous college names to define the two campuses. The College is split across two sites in Essex. The Seevic campus is in Benfleet and the Palmer's campus is in Grays.

In the most recent Ofsted inspections before merger, both colleges were judged to require improvement. The monitoring visit took place to review and evaluate the progress governors, leaders and staff have made to establish a shared strategic direction for the new college. The visit also considered improvements made in the quality of provision since the previous inspections.

Themes

What progress have leaders, managers and governors made in establishing a shared vision, mission and values for the new college and in identifying strategic priorities and an effective management structure?

Reasonable progress

Leaders and governors have put in place a clear vision for the college which focusses sharply on learners' routes to employment. They have established five specific specialist areas of learning within the college. These are creative and digital; health, care and medical; financial sector and professional services; life and sports sciences; and early years, childcare and education. Through these areas, learners have clear routes to employment through their learning programme. Staff understand and share the vision for the college and the careers-focussed approach leaders have introduced.

Senior leaders and governors have reviewed and rationalised the management structure at the college appropriately. Since the merger, governors have intervened directly to encourage changes to the college's management structure. A consequence of the governors' intervention is that apprenticeship provision will become the responsibility of a separate learning provider owned by the college. Leaders and governors recognise the need for specialist management and for more rapid improvement in the quality of this provision.

Leaders have brought staff from across both sites together into clearly defined curriculum teams. Leaders have established an effective approach to observing teaching and learning across the merged college. Staff benefit from their colleagues' experience through peer support in the classroom. As a result, the quality of teaching and learning has improved at the Seevic campus, although the quality of provision at the Palmer's site has not yet improved rapidly enough.

What progress have senior leaders and governors made in establishing an effective governance structure with suitable expertise to serve the needs of the college? Reasonable progress

Governance arrangements have strengthened this academic year. Governors recognised the need to increase their challenge and their impact following the merger. After a thorough audit of the existing governors' skills, the governors and senior leaders recruited new members. Governors now have the right expertise to oversee the strategic decision-making of senior leaders. They have benefited from appropriate training to improve their skills as a board. Membership of the board of governors has been stable since the start of the academic year.

Governors are drawn from both campuses and include staff and student representatives. Governors have been instrumental in setting the strategic direction of the college and the careers focus in teaching and learning. Governors use their own links effectively to directly benefit learners through their good relationships with local employers.

Governors have challenged the principal to ensure that they receive accurate information. As a result, they have an effective understanding of the quality of learning and the learner experience. Governors are aware of how they can further strengthen their influence on the quality of provision through their financial expertise and the long-term investment in digital skills and technology.

What progress have senior leaders made in ensuring that the curriculum tackles the skills gaps in the local economy while meeting the needs of employers and learners? Significant progress

Leaders have ensured that the courses the college offers align appropriately to the employment needs in the local area. Leaders work effectively in partnership with a range of local organisations and groups to ensure that their five sector areas provide clear routes into identified careers. For example, through one of the local authority strategic boards, leaders identified that digital and virtual design skills are a key shortage in the logistics and creative industries. As a result, leaders have shaped their future investment and curriculum plans to provide programmes in which learners can develop skills in virtual and augmented reality.

Leaders have carefully redesigned the range of courses the college offers since the merger. Employers and students are actively involved in curriculum design through the college's sector boards. This has led to a reinvigorated and appropriate curriculum. For example, in life and sport science, leaders, staff and students work with local sports therapy units, gyms, and higher education institutions to review the curriculum and skills that are taught. The results of the boards inform additional activities which learners participate in, including additional qualifications and volunteer programmes.

Most learners complete a worthwhile work placement as part of their learning programme. Learners are clear about the positive impact of these placements on their everyday lives and their long-term career plans. In addition, a very large proportion of learners engage in relevant work-related activities. For example, A-level learners attend regular events to encourage them to consider wider career opportunities. Leaders seek learners' views on these events regularly and have made improvements as a result of their feedback.

What progress have leaders and managers made in evaluating the quality of provision, and actioning key weaknesses in predecessor colleges identified at the previous inspections? Reasonable progress

Governors, leaders and managers have a clear understanding of the quality of their provision and have implemented suitable actions for improvement. Leaders and managers work effectively in collaboration with teachers. This has ensured that classroom practice has improved in most areas, particularly at the Seevic campus.

Leaders' improvement plans focus strongly on teaching and learning. They use their knowledge of areas requiring improvement to establish well-formed actions, which they regularly review to confirm improvements.

Teachers ensure that learners are supported effectively in their learning. Most teachers plan extra sessions to enable learners to improve their work further. Learners behave well and are keen to learn. Learners' behaviour at the Palmer's campus is much improved.

Teachers provide effective individual support for learners to enable them to achieve. For example, oral feedback from teachers is thought provoking, enabling learners to prepare better for examinations and assessments. In art and design, learners benefit from teachers' careful feedback which enables them to improve the standards of their work more rapidly.

Learners know the grades they are aiming for in their examinations and assessments, and most know what they need to do to complete their qualifications. However, they are less clear about what they need to learn and the skills they need to develop to achieve higher grades or improve their standards of work.

Staff share best practice. Professional development activities are accessible to all. For example, newly appointed teacher improvement practitioners deliver professional development sessions using technology in specially equipped rooms on each site to reach a wider audience. Some staff work across both sites, particularly those in support roles, which results in improved support for learners who have a specific learning need.

In the small sample of learning observed, particularly in A-level provision at the Palmer's campus and apprenticeship training, learners do not make rapid progress. In these sessions, learners do not acquire new skills rapidly and teachers often fail to check learners' understanding thoroughly or help them consolidate or deepen their learning.

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