

East Sussex College Group

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

East Sussex College Group was formed on 31 March 2018 as a result of a merger between Sussex Coast College Hastings and Sussex Downs College. The merged college has four campuses at Hastings, Eastbourne, Newhaven and Lewes. Sussex Downs College was inspected in November 2017 and was judged to require improvement. Sussex Coast College Hastings was inspected in December 2017 and was judged to be good.

During the monitoring visit, inspectors visited the campuses at Eastbourne and Lewes. Inspectors evaluated the progress leaders and managers have made in implementing the recommendations from the inspection of Sussex Downs College. They also considered the impact that new leaders and managers have had in establishing the merged college.

Themes

What progress have governors and senior leaders of the merged college made to support and challenge managers and teachers to ensure that students and apprentices receive high-quality education and training across the college sites and the range of the college's provision? Significant progress

Governors, leaders and managers have worked highly effectively since the merger of the colleges to establish the identity of each campus and place each one at the heart of its local community. Governors have established local boards for each campus to which local business, community and education leaders contribute. This has enabled each campus leader to develop a curriculum that meets local skills needs.

Governors and leaders have written a new strategic plan for the period 2018–21. They articulate clearly their vision for high-quality education and training. They identify how they will achieve their ambitions and how these will benefit the region.

Senior leaders have rapidly established systems to hold leaders, managers and teachers to account for improvements to teaching, learning and assessment and learners' outcomes. Curriculum and subject managers use a wide range of data very astutely to make judgements about students' and apprentices' progress and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. They are becoming very adept at identifying areas for improvement and setting specific remedial actions.

Leaders' risk-based approach to improving teaching and learning has led to managers prioritising swift interventions in underperforming subjects. Early indications show that their actions are having a highly positive impact.

What progress have leaders, managers and teachers made in improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in English and mathematics for students on study programmes at level 2 and below?

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have led a culture change regarding the importance of students and apprentices achieving qualifications, and improving their skills, in English and mathematics. For example, vocational teachers and curriculum managers share the responsibility with the English and mathematics teams for making sure that their students and apprentices attend lessons for these subjects.

At the Lewes campus, students are developing their English and mathematics skills effectively, based on teachers' assessments of their skills. This enables students to work on the specific skills they have yet to master. They receive positive feedback on what they have achieved. Students at the Eastbourne campus speak very positively about their increased confidence in solving mathematical problems and developing their English skills.

Students can identify how the skills they have developed in English and/or mathematics lessons help them improve in their main programme of study. For example, music students have improved their creative writing in GCSE English and use their improved skills and vocabulary to write better music reviews, a component of their main course.

Despite teachers' and managers' sterling efforts to improve students' attendance at lessons for English and mathematics qualifications, a few students continue to have poor rates of attendance. Their absence from lessons slows the progress they make in improving their skills and knowledge. In a few cases, students turn up to lessons late and unprepared. Very recent actions by managers and teachers are starting to lead to slight improvements in students' attendance.

What progress have leaders, managers, teachers and assessors made in setting clear and specific targets for students and apprentices so that they can improve their practical skills, knowledge and skills for work rapidly?

Reasonable progress

Teachers and assessors are becoming more adept at setting students and apprentices clear and specific targets for learning. They are putting the recent training they have had to good use in lessons, in tutorials and in apprentices' reviews.

The majority of students know what their target grades are and most have a clear idea of how they intend to achieve them. Teachers' feedback effectively enables them to review their progress. Current students are making good progress towards achieving their goals.

Managers recognise that they still have work to do to help teachers and assessors to set clear and specific targets for students and apprentices. For example, students

and apprentices are not always clear about what they have to do to achieve a target. In the very small sample of lessons observed during the visit, several teachers set learning outcomes to complete a process or activity, rather than focusing on new skills, knowledge or learning needed by students or apprentices.

What progress have leaders and managers made in raising teachers' and assessors' expectations of what their students and apprentices can achieve? Significant progress

High aspirations and ambitions permeate every aspect of college life, from governors to students. Staff have a renewed sense of urgency and importance about improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and students' and apprentices' outcomes. The chief executive, supported by the group principals, articulates this vision clearly and staff know their responsibilities and accountabilities for improving the provision at the college.

To improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, leaders observed all teaching staff in the first three weeks of the autumn term. Managers used the information they gained from this activity to help teachers to improve their practice rapidly. Teachers valued managers reviewing their teaching and spoke with enthusiasm to inspectors about the improvements they have made to their practice. They identify the positive impact this is having in students' and apprentices' progress.

Despite their rapid and effective work to bring about improvement, senior leaders are realistic in their assessment of their progress. They rightly recognise that they still have much work to do to achieve their high ambitions. They know how they intend to do this.

What progress have leaders, managers and teachers made in increasing the proportion of students on study programmes who complete high-quality external work experience placements? Significant progress

A very high proportion of students have completed a meaningful work experience placement or have firm plans in place to complete one before the end of the academic year. Students recognise and value the benefits they gain in developing their skills during work experience. They appreciate the links between their skills development at work and their learning back at college. This helps raise their aspirations and ambitions further.

Managers responsible for work experience have worked diligently to set up industrial placements for students. They are working closely with several local companies to give identified students the opportunity to complete an extended period of work experience. For example, a student on the level 3 construction and built environment course has started a placement with a large national building company that is

completing a project in Eastbourne. Several more placements are planned to start in the spring term.

Managers recognise that the legacy issues with second year A-level students not completing placements remain. They have put appropriate actions in place to ensure that first year A-level students have sufficient time, guidance and support to complete an external work experience placement or take part in a social enterprise project. Students are aware of this and are enthusiastic about having the opportunity to undertake a placement.

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