

New College Swindon

Monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector:	Steven Tucker, Her Majesty's Inspector
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Type of provider:	General further education college
Address:	New College Drive Swindon Wiltshire SN3 1AH

Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This monitoring visit was carried out as a result of the merger between Swindon College and New College in August 2020. New College was confirmed to be a good provider at a short inspection in November 2017. Swindon College was inspected in December 2018 when it was judged as 'requires improvement'.

During this monitoring visit, inspectors focused on two themes associated with the merger. They considered a third theme concerning the 'requires improvement' judgement in 2018 for the 16 to 19 study programmes at Swindon College.

At the time of the inspection, the college had approximately 3,600 learners aged 16 to 18, 3,900 adult learners and 940 apprentices. A majority of the college's funding is for 16- to 18-year-old learners. Most of the college's courses are based on two campuses. The large A-level provision is taught at the Queen's Drive campus, with vocational courses split across both North Star and Queen's Drive campuses. In addition, the college has a small adult learning centre in the town. Approximately 10% of the college's funding is spent on courses delivered by subcontractors throughout the country.

Themes

What progress have leaders made in establishing a cohesive vision and culture in the newly merged college?

Reasonable progress

Since the merger of Swindon College and New College in 2020, governors and senior leaders have developed a well-considered strategy for the college that they have communicated clearly to staff, employers and stakeholders. Senior leaders have consulted thoroughly with staff and invested the time and energy needed to communicate the ongoing progress of the merger. As a result, they have successfully gained the support of staff. Leaders value the views of staff. For example, the starting point for their project to define the college's values is a consultation with staff.

Senior leaders have taken a sensibly measured approach to achieving their vision of all staff and learners feeling part of one college. They evaluate well the measures that they are taking to achieve a fully integrated college and use their evaluation wisely to inform their next steps. Staff recognise the successes leaders have had so far in developing a 'one-college' ethos, but they are less clear about the steps that leaders still need to take.

Leaders have focused successfully on aligning systems and processes, such as tutorials, support for English and mathematics and information systems, across both

campuses. Staff recognise how this has quickly removed some of the day-to-day difficulties caused by bringing two institutions together. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have successfully encouraged and helped staff to work together to form new teams. Groups of staff who teach the same subject are particularly positive about how they are supported and encouraged to share ideas and resources. They are enthusiastic about how the curriculum has been enriched by deploying their skills on both campuses. For example, teachers with experience of specific specialisms in the health and social care sector, who had taught in one predecessor college, now teach across both campuses. Media teachers from one predecessor college, which had strong links with the industry, have productively shared their strategies for engaging employers with new colleagues.

Governors have successfully established a board that draws on the experience and knowledge of governors from the predecessor colleges. Governors identified clearly the additional skills needed on the board and recruited appropriate new members. As a result, the board is effective at supporting and challenging senior leaders.

What progress have leaders made in developing a curriculum which is closely aligned to learners' aspirations and opens up employment opportunities? Reasonable progress

Following the merger, leaders quickly made changes to the courses the college offers. They removed the confusing duplication that had crept in as the two predecessor colleges competed for learners. College courses now provide suitable pathways from level 1 through to higher education in many vocational sectors. Learners understand clearly their options for employment or further study. They are particularly knowledgeable about how their full-time courses are preparing them to move on to an apprenticeship.

On many courses, managers and teachers use their close relationships with employers to identify what skills and knowledge local businesses require of prospective employees. For example, employers told teachers what computer programming languages they use, so the college now teaches these languages to learners. Local employers advise helpfully the college as it develops new courses for emergent technology in fields such as the cyber sector and advanced manufacturing engineering. By working more closely with employers, staff have increased the range of opportunities learners have for work placements. The new Institute of Technology at the North Star campus has enabled teachers to raise learners' aspirations by increasing the range of higher education courses in Swindon.

As a result of bringing two colleges together, senior leaders have reduced the confusion previously experienced by local employers, stakeholders and learners about which college did what. For example, local employers now contact one college to find out about apprenticeships. In the past, they had to contact two colleges.

The college continues to subcontract provision extensively to training providers. This provision does not directly benefit the people of Swindon since it funds education in

other parts of the country. Leaders have yet to develop a clear strategy for resolving the potential conflict between this and their aspirations to provide education and training for the people of Swindon.

What progress have leaders made in improving the education programmes for young people previously taught at Swindon College? Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have taken generally appropriate steps to improve English and mathematics provision at the North Star campus. They usefully have increased the number of hours for these courses. Teachers are increasingly developing learners' English and mathematical knowledge in ways that are specific to their vocational subject. Not all teachers and managers take sufficient account of gaps in learners' knowledge when adapting the college-wide curriculum plan for English and mathematics.

Leaders have effectively strengthened the pastoral care and individual support for learners at the North Star campus. They have achieved this by working closely with staff teams to improve support for learners with learning difficulties/special educational needs. Leaders and managers closely monitor learners' progress. They use the results of their monitoring effectively to identify learners who are at risk of falling behind. They work closely with progress coaches to provide learners with appropriate support.

Teachers have relevant vocational experience. Learners who have attended courses at North Star for some years told inspectors that the quality of teaching has improved.

Leaders and managers use a good range of methods to improve the quality of teaching. Staff who act as teaching and learning coaches are well respected by the teachers they support. Teachers attend a good range of valuable training on teaching methodology. Teachers readily explain how this focus on teaching has helped them. They are less confident when reflecting on how they improve the content of the curriculum beyond changing units or awarding bodies. The evidence leaders collect about the quality of teaching reflects the high importance they place on this and the efforts they are making to bring about improvements. However, they do not pay sufficient attention to the content of courses when assessing the quality of provision.

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