

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: The Bournemouth and Poole
College
Date of visit: 18 March 2008

Context

The Bournemouth and Poole College is one of the largest general further education colleges in the country and the biggest provider of academic and vocational education in Dorset. It is located on eight sites. The two main sites at Lansdowne, Bournemouth and North Road, Poole deliver over 80% of the curriculum provision and house the central support services and departments. Students are drawn from across Dorset and parts of Hampshire. The college offers a very wide range of provision, from pre-entry courses to higher education (HE) courses. Many short courses are run for industry and commerce. There is substantial provision for work-based learning and for overseas students. The college is a Centre of Vocational Excellence in culinary arts and, in partnership with other providers, in retail and care.

In 2006/07 the college had 3,103 full-time students and 14,560 part-time students across the eight teaching Academies. In addition, the college enrolled 657 full-time and 356 part-time HE students, as well as 547 work-based learners, 153 entry to employment student leavers and 389 school students aged 14 to 16. There were 174 international students.

The college was last inspected in January 2007. Its overall effectiveness was judged to be good, as were the quality of its provision, its leadership and management, and its capacity to improve. Achievements and standards were adjudged satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in improving achievement and standards?	Insufficient progress
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The college reports that in 2006/07 the overall success rate fell two percentage points to 72%, four points below the previous year's national average; the college ascribes this decline to a significant change in the profile of enrolments and qualifications taken, with funding changes leading to a sharp drop in the number of students taking short courses which historically lifted overall success rates. This explanation notwithstanding, the success rate in 2006/07 for students aged 16 to 18 on long courses was static at 68%, one percentage point below the previous year's

national average. The success rate for adult students fell in 2006/7 by two percentage points to be five points below the previous year's national average. Success rates for students on short courses rose two percentage points to be around the previous year's national average. The pattern of change is variable between the two age groups and the three different main qualification levels, but overall shows a decline from 2005/06 figures, and the success rates of students at the college are slightly worse now than they were at the last inspection in January 2007.

For students aged 16 to 18, success rates on long courses at level 1 rose marginally in 2006/07 to be three percentage points above the previous year's national average; at level 2, they rose four percentage points to be three points above the previous year's national average; at level 3, which represents the largest volume of students at this age, they fell two percentage points to be six points below the previous year's national average. The college correctly identifies low retention rates as the main contributor to this decline.

For adult students, the picture in 2006/07 is one of relative under-performance at all three main qualification levels. Success rates on long courses at level 1 rose six percentage points but remained six points below the previous year's national average; at level 2, which represents the largest volume of adult students, they fell seven points after two strong years to a level five points below the previous year's national average; at level 3, they fell one percentage point and are now two points below the previous year's national average.

Success rates for students taking AS and A level qualifications have declined for students aged 16 to 18 by four and two percentage points respectively; and for adult students (a much smaller volume) they have declined significantly at AS level but risen significantly at A level. It would appear that measures summarised at the last annual assessment visit (June 2007) to try and improve AS level results have so far failed to bear fruit. The college is confident that these measures will have a discernible impact in 2007/08 on the first cohort who will have been exposed to them for their whole year of study.

Success rates are high for work-based learners: the rate of framework completion for both apprentices and advanced apprentices are both well above national averages, at 69% and 79% respectively. For the significant number of young students on the entry to employment programme, their progress rate from this programme onto employment or further structured training is high, at 66% - well above the regional and national averages. Almost all these students completed their learning plan in 2006/07.

Success rates in key skills have continued to improve, from 45% to 51% in 2006/07. This rate of improvement has been most marked for adult students.

Students overall make the expected degree of progress from their prior attainment on entry to the college. Significant value is added to their attainment in performing arts, media and health studies. These subject areas have a longer history of using target setting and educational milestones to motivate students and improve performance; they also have a more refined capacity to identify specific criterion-referenced areas of weakness in particular units of students' work. The college points out that the relatively high key stage 4 scores achieved by school leavers at age 16 makes it more difficult to add significant value at age 18. The college no longer subscribes to any commercial value-added system.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in improving target-setting at course and curriculum level?	Reasonable progress
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This was identified in the January 2007 Ofsted inspection report and in the 2006/07 self assessment report as a general area for development. Aspects of the use of data to set targets and so improve results were specified as areas for attention in four of the eight self-assessments at Academy level: sixth form; health, care and education; skills for life; and service industries. The college adds that other Academies are now also fully aware that they need to focus more sharply on developing their target setting methodology, drawing on the well established good practice in a few areas. There are comprehensive systems in place and a clear target setting cycle that is rigorously monitored at curriculum level. College senior managers acknowledge that some courses and curriculum areas need to change their culture and habits of target setting and of progress monitoring in order to comply with established college practices.

The college's use of data is reliable and rigorous. All data are centrally collated and analysed and there is a prompt and well managed response to the changing picture of course achievements at various points throughout the year. The college claims that the target setting and monitoring systems give it a very clear and timely picture of areas causing concern, in which any significant numbers of students are not on track to achieve. Their responses to these risk alerts are now swift and decisive. It remains to be seen whether this sharper focus on these systems improves the success rates of some courses in 2007/08.

What progress has the college made in preparing for the introduction of new diplomas?	Reasonable progress
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The college asserts in its self-assessment report that "collaboration with local schools is extremely good and is significantly strengthened by plans for diploma delivery". After a frustratingly slow start by the two local unitary authorities of Poole and Bournemouth, who did not promote the submission of any bids through gateway one for the new diplomas, the college is now involved in partnership with five different 14 to 19 consortia across Poole, Bournemouth and Dorset. Seven diploma applications

are being submitted through gateway two, and the college has a leading strategic role in most of the consortia for most of the provision, and would expect to teach the post-16 diplomas at all three levels. The college does not see transport across the county as a significant barrier to participation, since many students already come from all over Dorset, and indeed parts of Hampshire, to attend courses at the college. One of the consortia, Wessex, crosses three local authorities and although the schools and college work well together this arrangement presents difficulties of responsibility and accountability to the local authorities.

What progress has the college made in developing its virtual learning environment (VLE)?	Reasonable progress
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The college cites evidence that the large majority of students now make use of the VLE, but they also acknowledge in the self-assessment report that in some quarters there is confusion as what the VLE actually is. The last annual assessment visit (June 2007) noted a mixed picture in the extent of the VLE's development and use. The college now judges that in many curriculum areas use of the VLE and electronic and on-line resources generally is exemplary: resources are thoroughly researched and mapped against courses, and curriculum leaders have worked closely with ILT specialists in the college to design and create materials. Many staff now use the VLE extensively for formative assessment and as an interactive tool for students to extend their learning beyond the classroom. Some curriculum areas still need to gain confidence and skill in being able to realise whatever educational potential e-learning has to offer in their subject, and the college is offering good levels of incentive and support to those staff. Generally, the college is vigorously and successfully promoting the dynamic use of a wide range of imaginative e-learning materials.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in improving the accuracy, completeness and use of management information?	Reasonable progress
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The SAR acknowledges that 'target setting throughout the college is a weakness'. The last Ofsted inspection report (January 2007) judged that management information was reliable but that its use for target setting was underdeveloped. The last annual assessment visit notes a 'clear commitment to the validity of centrally held data'.

The college does have the capacity to produce accurate data of all sorts, and it does use these well at local level to set targets, measure and monitor progress and provide insights into where there is under-performance. Systems to produce reports, track performance and take prompt remedial action where necessary are increasingly well established and developed, and most course and curriculum managers have efficient and confident access to the data they need. The college is therefore making reasonable progress in improving its use of target setting.

The self-assessment report, including some summary data tables, is, however, misleading in its presentation of data because it quotes the national aggregation of all similar courses at each level, produced by a commercial data management system, and presents them as if they were validated national averages. This leads to some inaccurate judgements: for example, 'most success rates are now at or above national averages' implies an overall trend of improvement in 2006/07, which is not in fact the case – only success rates for students aged 16 to 18 at levels 1 and 2 are above average; all other success rates are below the previous year's national averages and the large majority of students (those studying at level 3 for students aged 16 to 18 and those studying at level 2 for adults) have suffered a decline in success in 2006/07 to levels clearly below the previous year's national averages.

The college acknowledges that this use of aggregated qualification data instead of recognised national averages for aggregated course levels is of limited value externally to the college and is therefore potentially misleading when comparisons are made with other colleges of a similar type. It argues, with validity, that at course level and even at some curriculum group level the use of data to set challenging targets and monitor performance against them is not impaired by this practice, and indeed may be of specific value to the college at local level, but it will ensure that in future self-assessment reports the data quoted are accurate against the validated college performance report and against recognised national averages aggregated at total course level.