

Name of college: Bexhill College
Date of visit: 10 December 2008

Context

Bexhill College is a medium-sized sixth form college in East Sussex. It serves a mixed area, with pockets of affluence combined with relative deprivation in parts of Bexhill and the Hastings area. Most learners are full-time students aged 16 to 18 on advanced level courses, although the college has diversified significantly in recent years to offer a fairly wide portfolio of courses for students of all ages at all levels. The College was last inspected in March 2007. At that inspection, overall effectiveness was judged to be satisfactory. Achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management were all judged to be satisfactory, as was the College's capacity to improve. Provision in four sector subject areas was inspected, and each of these was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

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| How much progress has the college made in improving students' outcomes, particularly on AS level courses? | Significant progress |
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The College has made significant progress in improving students' outcomes over the last year. Between 2006/07 and 2007/08, success rates on long courses rose significantly. Long course success rates for students aged 16 to 18 at Level 3, which constitutes the bulk of the College's provision, rose from 77% to 85%, in line with the 2006/07 national average for sixth form colleges. Success rates on AS courses rose from 70% to 79%, and on A-level courses from 93% to 96%. On both AS and A-level courses, the proportion of students who achieve high grades has also risen. Success rates on advanced vocational courses remain high. The progress that students make also improved significantly. The A-level performance system (ALPS) subscribed to by the college shows that students on A-level, AS and BTEC courses made very good progress in comparison with their prior attainment. Success rates for students aged 16 to 18 on Level 2 courses also rose significantly, and are now above the national average. At Level 1, success rates continued to climb and are significantly above the average. The relatively small number of adult students achieve success rates above the national average at all three levels.

The College recognises that, despite these significant improvements, there remain pockets of weak performance, for example, in mathematics, physics, graphic design, and a number of subjects with small numbers of students. Value-added data shows that the most able students on A-level courses are not achieving as well as they should.

Quality of provision

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| How much progress has been made in improving the monitoring of students' progress in order to raise standards? | Reasonable progress |
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The College recognises that although it has made reasonable progress in improving the systems for monitoring students' academic progress, there is further work to do. The electronic system for recording students' progress is relatively new, and progress is being made in making consistent use of it across the college. The system has considerable potential to become a powerful tool to monitor and review all aspects of students' progress. Individual reviews between students and their teachers and personal tutors take place, but procedures for recording the outcomes of these are not consistent across the college. Personal tutors do not always have all the information they need about students' progress in each of their courses to provide a clear overview of progress. Further work needs to be done to improve the consistent quality of students' individual learning plans. The student contract system, used to identify and support students at risk of not succeeding, is working well.

Leadership and management

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| How much progress has been made in improving the rigour of quality assurance procedures and self-assessment? | Significant progress |
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Both quality assurance procedures and self-assessment are significantly more rigorous than previously. The draft self-assessment report (SAR) for 2007/08 is significantly more evaluative, and realistic in its judgements, than its predecessor. The use of data to make judgements is much better, and outcomes are compared against appropriate benchmarks. Difficult judgements are not avoided; for example, the College judges its provision in the physical sciences and mathematics to be inadequate. The section SARs that report in detail on each curriculum area are also much improved, with both strengths and areas of underperformance being weighted appropriately. The section SARs would be improved further by a more rigorous analysis of the precise characteristics of pedagogy that underpin judgements on the quality of teaching and learning.

Quality assurance procedures across the College have become increasingly rigorous. There is greater willingness to identify and tackle areas of underperformance more swiftly. The use of internal 'notices to improve' is beginning to have an impact. Internal quality reviews of each section are thorough, and the increasing use of students' views to inform such reviews is a welcome development. Staff development is increasingly linked to the findings of lesson observations and other quality assurance procedures.

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| How much progress has been made in improving the use of data at curriculum level to monitor performance and plan for improvements? | Reasonable progress |
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Although the College has been slow to recognise the need to use a range of curriculum level data to monitor performance in order to raise standards, reasonable progress is now being made. Data are reliable, and increasingly timely. Many middle managers and teachers regard the improved accessibility to, and range of, data as playing a crucial role in enabling them to better monitor the progress both of individuals and student cohorts. Although data are used increasingly effectively to identify courses where students' performance is a concern, not all staff are clear about the respective responsibilities of teachers and managers at different levels to act on this information. College leaders recognise that despite the progress made there is further work to do to ensure that staff at all levels routinely use the available information as a tool to intervene swiftly to raise standards.

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| How much progress has been made in ensuring that governors' understanding and scrutiny of the College's performance is effective? | Reasonable progress |
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At the last inspection, it was reported that governors "realise the need to look more closely at course performance". Reasonable progress has been made in ensuring that governors understand more thoroughly the strengths and weaknesses of students' performance in comparison to national standards. Governors interviewed during the visit demonstrated a sound grasp of the courses where performance was weak, and had a clear view of the overall performance of the College. They recognised that prior to the last inspection, the corporation had not been sufficiently effective in recognising weaknesses, for example, in student retention rates. Governors now receive a good range of reports that enable them to monitor performance. Governors recognise the difficulty of devoting sufficient time to college business in the context of their own working lives. A useful development this year has been the presence of governors at validation panels for curriculum area self-assessment reports.