

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Taunton's College

Date of visit: 28 January 2009

Context

Taunton's College is a medium-sized sixth form college located in Southampton. The city has a population of around 220,000 of whom 7.6% are from minority ethnic groups. Although unemployment rates, at just over 2%, are low, the city is in the bottom third of authorities on the index of relative deprivation. The city is served by several sixth form colleges, general further education colleges and schools offering students a wide choice of options for study. In 2007/08, only 55.4% of 16-year olds in Southampton achieved 5A*-C grades compared to 63.7% nationally.

The college offers courses in 11 of the 15 sector subject areas and provision is available at all levels, from entry level to Level 3. In 2007/08, the college enrolled 1,294 students on full-time programmes and 133 adults mainly on part-time evening programmes. Three quarters of the students aged 16-18 follow programmes at Level 3.

The college's mission is to provide outstanding education in the Southampton area that meets and extends the aspirations of young people of all abilities and offers them excellent preparation for life. The attainment at key stage 4 of students enrolling on AS and A level courses at the college is lower than average for sixth form college. Approximately half of the students attending the college are in receipt of education maintenance allowance and 38% of students aged 16-18 live in designated priority neighbourhoods in Southampton.

The college was inspected in October 2007. Achievements and standards were judged satisfactory and the quality of provision and leadership and management good. The overall effectiveness of provision was judged good with good capacity to improve.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made since the last inspection in improving overall college success rates and for particular groups of students?	Insufficient progress
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Overall success rates for students following long courses improved from 73% in 2007 to 75%, but remain well below the 2007 national averages for sixth form colleges.

The majority of students enrol on GCE AS and A-level courses. Success rates improved slightly for A-level courses in 2008. The progress A-level students make relative to their qualifications at enrolment also improved and there was a 9 percentage point increase in the proportion of these students achieving high grades.

Although retention rates for AS-level students improved in 2008 there was no improvement in overall success rates, which continue to be well below the average for sixth form colleges. Progression rates from AS to A-level courses also continue to be low. Success rates for vocational courses at Level 3 remain satisfactory although rates declined in 2008, despite improved retention, with students making better progress than was hitherto the case.

The college is addressing weaknesses in the four areas deemed by the local learning and skills council (LSC) to be below the minimum level of performance in 2007. Actions to improve outcomes in these areas are yet to impact fully on success rates however.

Data newly published by the DCSF, comparing the progress made by the college's level 3 students aged 16-18, with all students with the same levels of attainment at key stage 4 nationally, indicate that the college's students are making better than average progress overall when contextual factors are taken into consideration.

Success rates for vocational provision at Levels 1 and 2 have improved significantly and are good, although this constitutes only a minor part of the college's provision. GCSE success rates overall declined further in 2008. They are below average in English and continue to be poor in science despite some improvement.

What actions have been taken to improve success rates in key skills and students' literacy and numeracy skills?	Insufficient progress
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Progress has been slow in improving the low key skills success rates noted at the last inspection. In 2007/08, 32% of students undertaking communications at Level 3 achieved the full award whilst 22% achieved a full ICT award at Level 3. The college

has, however, fully recognised the need to improve the achievement of skills for life. A strategic decision has been made to introduce functional skills as an alternative route to key skills for Level 2 students. A pilot programme was launched in January 2008. Numbers were initially low but they have increased substantially in the current year. The college recognised the need to provide more support for students with ESOL needs who now receive a two fold increase in support for specialist tutors. It is too early to fully judge the effectiveness of the actions for improvement which have been put in place.

Quality of provision

What actions have been taken since the last inspection to ensure students are enrolled on appropriate courses and progress appropriately?	Reasonable progress
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Arrangements for initial advice and guidance have been appropriately reviewed since the last inspection. A greater emphasis is now placed upon liaison between the college and schools. The college is working hard to understand better the individual needs and personal circumstance of students prior to enrolment. Useful staff training has been undertaken with, for instance, head teachers from feeder schools providing an insight into pupil's prior experience. Taster days for potential students have been improved, with a wider range of experiences being provided. Students are used well as 'ambassadors' to help potential students understand what is expected of them at college. The college is now pursuing a policy of more stringent consideration of student's prior attainment as a guide to their future success.

It is too early to judge the full effectiveness of actions taken. There has, however, been a significant reduction in the number of students changing courses in their first term. The number of applications to higher education has increased since the last inspection, although the college recognises that these are still comparatively low. Retention of students from AS to A-level programmes remains a key challenge for the college although evidence provided through the college's student monitoring arrangements suggest more students are committed to gaining A-level qualifications.

What actions have been taken since the last inspection to improve students' retention and are they having an impact?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in improving overall retention rates, although there are variations across the curriculum. Retention rates for AS-level students improved by 4 percentage points in 2007/08 to 87%. For vocational Level 2 programmes, retention rates increased by 11 percentage points to 87% in 2007/08, whilst those on vocational Level 3 programmes fell by 7 points during the same period. In-year retention data to December 2008 show further overall improvement.

Since the last inspection, the college has recruited four student liaison officers who provide particularly timely follow up in cases of student absence. Liaison with the parents of absent students has been substantially increased and students appreciate the pastoral care which is available to them. The college now employs a part-time counsellor from the Relate organisation who provides targeted support for students with particularly challenging circumstances. Support and monitoring has improved with enhanced tutorials and more individualised action planning for those identified as being at risk.

What action has been taken since the last inspection to improve the impact of teaching on learning?	Reasonable progress
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The college now places much more emphasis on helping students take more responsibility for their own learning. This is particularly the case with AS students, many of whom the college has identified too often to be ill prepared for the challenges of AS-level work and the amount of work expected of them. Increasing use is made of computers and communication technology, both within and outside the classroom, to support learning and help students develop as independent learners. Much more emphasis is now placed on assessment of students' progress and on the use of rigorous assessment procedures to improve their learning. Students are now set assessed work more frequently and detailed discussions with individual students are effective in identifying underperformance and in initiating actions which help students adopt a more disciplined approach to learning.

Leadership and management

What actions have been taken since the last inspection to improve the impact of quality assurance procedures and intervention arrangements?	Reasonable progress
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Quality assurance arrangements were not effective in preventing a decline in the quality of provision in two areas of the curriculum which were self-assessed as inadequate in 2008. However, quality assurance arrangements have been used well to identify areas for improvement which are clearly set out in the 2007/08 self-assessment report. These are being addressed enthusiastically and purposefully by managers and morale is strong at all levels.

Good use is made of internal and external review arrangements to support self-assessment, identify and promote good practice and improve the quality of teaching and learning. Lesson observation profiles based on planned line manager observations are stronger than those produced through the college's unannounced internal quality review arrangements. Decisive action, including staffing changes, has been taken in relation to weaknesses in teaching and curriculum management.

Although the benefits of these changes are not yet fully manifest in improved outcomes for students, lesson observations conducted during this academic year indicate improvements in the quality of teaching and learning.

Arrangements for monitoring the performance of courses are now much more closely aligned to the monitoring of progress made by individual students. Teachers are much more involved in the on going review of performance at course level and there is more focused and timely intervention when students are underachieving.