

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: John Ruskin College

Date of visit: 18 June 2009

Context

John Ruskin College is a sixth form college situated in the south of Croydon, close to the border with Bromley. It is one of three colleges in the borough. Within the borough there are 33 secondary schools, seven of which have sixth forms. Around 75% of Croydon school leavers remain in full-time education. All the colleges in Croydon have a significant proportion of out-of-borough learners. This is most marked at John Ruskin College where recruitment from local schools has decreased since the previous inspection. In 2008/09 there are signs that this trend is reversing. The prior attainment for level 3 students at the college is significantly lower than that usually seen in sixth form colleges. Some 89% of the college's learners are from minority ethnic communities.

The college was last inspected in March 2006. Overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management were all judged satisfactory. Support for students and social and education inclusion were judged good. Four curriculum areas were inspected and all were judged satisfactory.

Since the previous inspection, the college has significantly changed the range of its provision, with the introduction of more vocational courses, especially at level 3. Over 75% of college students study on vocational programmes across levels 1 to 3. The college has made the strategic decision to discontinue its AS and A-level provision from September 2009 and to replace these courses with vocational awards and diplomas, to better meet the needs and interests of its students.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has the college made in raising students' success rates at all levels since the last monitoring visit?	Reasonable progress
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The college has continued to focus strongly on improving success rates for all students and has revised the management structure and strengthened quality assurance arrangements to support this. Programme leaders are now closely involved in monitoring performance and data is used more effectively to identify concerns or any areas of underperformance.

Overall success rates have improved since the previous inspection in 2006. They remain below national averages for sixth form colleges but are broadly in line with the 2006/07 national averages for further education colleges.

In 2007/08 success rates improved for students aged 16 to 18 at levels 1 and 3, but poor success rates in GCSE English caused overall success rates at level 2 to fall. The college introduced a different syllabus for GCSE English in 2007/08 and many students sat the examination in November. This strategy was not successful and the college has since reverted to the previous syllabus and examinations in June. Changes in staffing have improved the consistency of the quality of teaching and assessment and increased the completion rates and the quality of coursework. Retention rates are 20 percentage points higher in 2008/09 than last year and the college is confident that the proportion of students gaining A*-C grades in GCSE English will be significantly higher this year.

Success rates remain below average on many AS-level courses and students do not always make the expected progress on AS-level programmes. They make at least satisfactory, and sometimes good, progress on A-level courses and good progress on vocational courses at level 2 and 3. Many students on national diploma courses achieve merit or distinction grades. However, the proportion of students who achieve higher grades on other courses is below that seen nationally. Managers are aware that this is a key area for future development.

In 2007/08 success rates improved on vocational courses at all levels, particularly so at levels 1 and 3. The college's current data for 2008/09 indicates that retention has improved in most areas. Achievement rates on vocational courses were high in 2007/08, and with improved retention rates, there are early indications that success rates will also improve, particularly at levels 1 and 2. Retention rates have also increased on AS and A-level provision in 2008/09.

The proportion of students progressing to higher level courses is a strength, with 90% of students progressing from level 2 to 3 courses and a high number of students progressing from A-level and level 3 vocational courses to higher education.

Quality of provision

To what extent has the college maintained the progress in teaching and learning noted at the last monitoring visit?	Reasonable progress
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The college has continued to develop its strategy to improve teaching and learning and is successfully increasing the proportion of good and better teaching. The analysis of the college's internal lesson observations indicate that 72% were judged good or better, up from 68% noted at the last monitoring visit. Programme leaders clearly identify strengths and areas for improvement in their subject areas. This provides a clear focus for staff development, which is increasingly well focused on specific themes and targeted for subject teams or individual development. Teachers and mentors share good practice through offering themed and differentiated bite-

sized training sessions at lunchtime or the end of the college day. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of staff attending these sessions.

The college has increased the number of mentors who support new staff, and teachers whose lessons have been graded satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Results from re-observations indicate that this support is having a positive impact in raising the quality of teaching. In 2007/08 not all subject area self-assessment reports (SAR) evaluated the quality of teaching and learning sufficiently. The college has revised the format of the SAR for this academic year to provide clearer guidance on what aspects should be included.

Over the last year, managers have identified improvements in the regular sharing of lesson objectives with students, though acknowledge that there is more work to be done to ensure these are differentiated to meet different needs and abilities. ILT is now used more widely and the number of staff and students using the VLE has increased significantly over the last year. In most subject areas, students now have access to relevant work experience opportunities or work on live project briefs for external clients.

Leadership and management

To what extent has the college secured improvements in the subject areas which were judged unsatisfactory in the 2007/08 self-assessment – English, science and mathematics and sport.	Reasonable progress
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The self-assessment report for 2007/08 clearly identified some aspects of unsatisfactory performance, particularly on some courses in English, science and mathematics and sport. Success rates on a number of AS courses in these areas were very low and the proportion achieving A*-C grades in GCSE English and mathematics were also low.

The college is implementing increasingly rigorous quality assurance systems including the introduction of formal monitoring of all programme areas every six weeks. Programme leaders now have a much greater accountability for the performance of their areas. In English, science and mathematics and sport, new managers have been appointed during the last year and new teaching staff appointed. This has helped to improve the consistency of the quality of teaching and closer monitoring of student progress. For example, sports staff make effective use of a electronic monitoring system which has helped improve students' attendance and achievement. The college plans to develop this system across the college in the next academic year.

Although it is too early to determine the final outcomes for students in 2008/09, there are early indications that performance in these subject areas is set to improve. For example, in mid-June, retention rates were 95% in AS biology and 100% in AS chemistry, compared with 73% and 71% respectively in 2007/08. Retention rates have also improved significantly on many vocational sports courses, although rates

are low on the recently introduced national award course. Retention rates on GCSE English have improved from 70% in 2007/08 to 90% this year and are currently 100% on AS English literature. On GCSE mathematics, retention has improved from 68% to 82%. The college is confident that success rates on these courses will be significantly higher than in 2007/08, but is aware that they will still remain below the national average on these AS courses and on GCSE mathematics.