

Brooke House Sixth Form College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Last day of inspection: 26 November 2009
Type of provider: Sixth form college
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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Brooke House Sixth Form College (BSix), located in the London Borough of Hackney, has around 1,400 students. Most are aged 16 to 18. Approximately 60% of the students are enrolled on advanced programmes, 30% on intermediate and 10% on foundation. The student cohort is ethnically diverse. The two largest groups are young people of African and African-Caribbean heritage.

The context in which BSix operates is complex and competitive. Secondary school education has been improving in Hackney over the last few years, after a period of very low educational attainment. It remains the case, though, that a high proportion of those residents who are aged 16 to 18 continue to leave the borough to undertake their sixth form education elsewhere. The college's strategy is to raise achievement and standards, develop strong and purposeful external partnerships and project a positive image.

BSix was last inspected in March 2009. Leadership and management were judged to be good, as was capacity to improve and equality of opportunity. Achievement and standards and quality of provision were judged to be satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during this visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

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| How much progress has the college made in further embedding the self-assessment process? | Significant progress |
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Since the last inspection the college has continued to refine its self-assessment process. Self-assessment now plays a pivotal role in maintaining the momentum to raise standards. Teachers and managers are very clear about the process and purpose. They have become increasingly skilled at critically evaluating provision, in the light of available evidence, feedback and national averages. Course reviews and curriculum self-assessment reports clearly identify strengths and areas for development. The summary self-assessment report for 2008/09 provides a thoughtful and realistic analysis of the quality of the college's provision.

Areas for development within curriculum self-assessment reports, when transferred to quality improvement plans, are linked to college-wide strategic aims. These quality improvement plans are regularly reviewed and meticulously monitored by department heads and senior managers. Although managers use data appropriately to inform their judgements, management information is not easily tailored to the needs of department heads. Senior managers are aware of the limitations of the management information system and have plans to address this issue.

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has the college made in improving outcomes for students? Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection, the college has made reasonable progress in improving outcomes. Data provided by the college for 2008/09 indicate that the overall success rate rose again for the third successive year, albeit from a low starting point. This pattern of improvement, though, is not consistent across levels or subject areas. Success rates at intermediate level rose significantly in 2008/09 to 76%. However, at foundation and advanced levels, the rate of improvement has been slower and success rates, at 61% and 68% respectively, remain below national averages when compared to sixth form and general further education colleges.

Students who completed GCE A-level and national diploma courses in 2008/09 made very good progress, taking into account their prior attainment. Success rates on these programmes have risen steadily over a three-year period. However, too many of the students who completed GCE AS-level programmes did not make the progress expected of them and success rates remained low. The college acknowledges weak performance at AS level in terms of pass rates, proportion of high grades and progress, and has taken firm action to improve this provision.

How much progress has the college made in improving retention, attendance and students' 'readiness to learn'? Significant progress

The college's relentless drive to improve students' 'readiness to learn' is beginning to have a positive impact. At the time of the last inspection, the 'readiness to learn' initiative was at an early stage of development. Retention and attendance rates are higher than they were at the same time last year, even though the college has recruited many more students. Students are well aware of the importance of attendance and punctuality. With posters on display, a newly designed student planner and a 'ready to learn' contract, students are reminded on a regular basis of the need to arrive at lessons on time and with the necessary resources. Many students are motivated by the rewards associated with 'commendation cards', given to them by teachers for good behaviour, meeting deadlines and the successful completion of homework. Students and teachers are positive about the change in timetabling arrangements in the current academic year, whereby most lessons have been shortened to one hour. In a recent internal quality review of this initiative, based on an audit of 116 lessons across all college departments, reviewers judged its impact to be good.

Quality of provision

How much progress has the college made in improving cross-college literacy and numeracy provision? Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection the college has appointed two new members of staff to take responsibility for literacy and numeracy. They started in September and have developed a policy that recognises the importance for students of achieving qualifications in mathematics and English. Managers have attended training in functional skills and are preparing staff for their implementation in 2010. Training days have been identified to introduce staff to the implications for their work of the change from national tests and key skills to functional skills. The college has identified consultants to assist them in the process of embedding literacy and numeracy more effectively through vocational subjects.

In the current academic year, the college has introduced a more robust system for assessing the language, literacy and numeracy needs of students, as part of the entry procedures. Online assessments, written assignments and the use of diagnostic tools are now more systematically used. Teaching staff report that they have greater confidence that students are better placed on their courses and that any support is more effectively planned. Students on courses for English for speakers of other languages report that they would appreciate more opportunity to develop specialist vocabulary related to their vocational specialism. The arrangements to capture the progress of students who are receiving additional learning support need further development.

How much progress has the college made in increasing the proportion of good and better teaching and learning? Significant progress

The last inspection report identifies as an area for development the need to increase the proportion of good and better teaching. So far, in 2009/10, the proportion is 80%, compared to 62% last year. A strong emphasis has been given to improving the grades. The interview for all new teaching staff includes an observed teaching and learning activity, and the assessment includes the views of students. Only teachers who are judged to be good are offered posts. Staff report that they have benefited from staff development, particularly peer assessments and the sharing of good practice in their subject specialisms. The introduction of monthly meetings with heads of departments has helped some teachers to discuss issues relating to their practice. The increased availability of the virtual learning environment has been helpful for some teachers and students, as has the shortening of lessons to one hour. The 'readiness to learn' initiative has been particularly beneficial for teachers, who have found students more punctual and better prepared for their lessons. Teachers find they can concentrate more effectively on teaching activities, with fewer

interruptions and distractions. The recording of observations does not always provide sufficient emphasis on what students have learnt in the session.

How much progress has the college made in extending students' knowledge and understanding of the world of work?

Reasonable
progress

Exposure to the world of work is highlighted as an area for development in the last inspection report. Since the last inspection the college has taken a number of actions to encourage staff to include a greater focus on the world of work in its courses. In some departments staff have been given targets to increase work-related opportunities for students. The tutorial programme now includes a requirement to provide activities on the world of work. The college has prepared a job specification for a 'world of work leader'.

Department heads have developed a range of different ways to engage students in work-related activities. The art team has encouraged students to explore the enterprise and business aspects of the art world. Art and design students on advanced level programmes are working as curators and publicising their own exhibition to be held in the BSix art gallery. This follows an enterprise day at the Courtauld Institute. The college is preparing to lease a hair and beauty salon locally. Over the summer four students with an interest in engineering took advantage of internships with an international oil and gas company. The college recognises that departments are at different stages of development.

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