

City College Plymouth

Reinspection report

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Type of provider: General Further Education College

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Introduction

City College Plymouth is a large general further education college which operates from two main sites. The college runs courses in most subject areas and offers qualifications from pre-entry to degree level. It has a large apprenticeship and Train to Gain contract. The college is Plymouth's largest A-level provider.

City College Plymouth was inspected in November 2008. The college's overall effectiveness was judged satisfactory. The quality of provision was found to be satisfactory or better in all areas inspected, except in science and mathematics, which was found to be inadequate. The inadequate subject area was reinspected on 26 and 27 January 2010.

The outcome of the reinspection is as follows:

Subject area	Original grade	Reinspection grade
Science and mathematics	4	3

Context

The number of learners enrolling for courses in science and mathematics in 2009/10 increased to 421 from 355 in the previous year. Most learners study full-time and around two thirds are aged 16 to 18. Most courses are at intermediate and advanced levels, and include GCSE, vocational science, A and AS levels, and access to higher education. The department has sixteen teaching staff who are supported by three technicians.

Key findings

- Learners' outcomes have improved since the previous inspection and are now satisfactory. Success rates increased between 2007/08 and 2008/09 at intermediate and advanced level and for learners of all ages. They are now above the national averages for adults, although still below average for learners aged 16 to 18, especially at advanced level.
- Success rates are high for most A-level subjects. At AS level, success rates have increased for all subjects from a very low baseline but remain below national averages for biology, chemistry and mathematics. The success rate on the access to higher education science course, with 81 learners enrolled in 2008/09, is high. However, success rates in the national diploma in applied science have been poor for the past three years.
- Learners on AS-level courses make satisfactory progress compared to their prior attainment at GCSE. Progression rates between AS- and A-level subjects increased by 15 percentage points in 2008/09. Attendance rates improved to the college target of 86%.

- The standard of learners' work is satisfactory. A strong focus is given to health and safety issues during practical laboratory lessons. Learners work well together and enjoy their studies.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Teachers have good subject knowledge and stimulate learners to think for themselves through careful questioning. Lesson planning is detailed and thorough. However, not all learners receive as much attention or challenge in lessons as they require. In less effective lessons, the pace of the teaching is too slow and there is insufficient consolidation of new information.
- Learners have good access to information and communication technology (ICT), which was identified as an area for improvement at the last inspection. All learners on AS-level courses are provided with their own laptops and use them extensively for work outside of lessons. Teachers are skilled at using interactive whiteboards to make their subject more interesting.
- Teachers' comments on learners' work are often not sufficiently detailed nor clear enough to help learners improve their work and make better progress.
- Individual learning plans are monitored regularly by tutors. Learners at risk of underperforming attend extra workshops which provide effective help. Most individual learning plans contain specific and measurable targets that indicate clearly how learners can improve their work. However, a minority of targets are insufficiently precise.
- Learners value the support they receive from teaching staff and tutors. However, the current procedures do not ensure that the overall progress of learners recorded by personal tutors is fed back to the relevant subject tutors. This reduces the effectiveness of subject tutors' discussions with learners.
- Initial diagnostic testing is used to place learners on the most appropriate courses. The results of these tests are used well by teachers to form an accurate profile of learners' abilities which is then used in lesson planning. Rates of retention have improved.
- Quality assurance procedures are rigorous and are starting to lead to improvements in the quality of provision. The use of management information is accurate and timely. However, self-assessment judgements focus on the positive aspects of the provision and do not always evaluate accurately the overall situation.
- The new science and mathematics management team have worked well with teaching staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning and promote high expectations among learners and staff. The numbers of learners participating has increased. Satisfactory progress has been made to rectify the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

What does City College Plymouth need to do to improve further?

- Support and promote the progress and outcomes for learners through rigorous monitoring of specific and measurable targets.
- Ensure that all teaching and learning challenges learners appropriately and promotes good or better progress.

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- Make sure learners joining AS-level courses are prepared fully for the difference in the standard of work between GCSE and AS level by providing appropriate additional support, such as the bridging courses implemented recently.
 - Establish rigorous procedures that ensure timely and regular liaison and reporting take place between tutors and subject teachers on the progress of learners.
 - Ensure that assessment includes helpful and specific comments in order to support learners' progress more effectively.
 - Ensure self-assessment judgements are fully self-critical, so that learners' outcomes and the quality of provision are judged accurately.

Additional Themes

Inspectors explored the following themes as part of this reinspection.

Themes

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has the college made in improving outcomes for 16 to 18-year-olds on courses at advanced level?

Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection, success rates at advanced level in work-based learning were good, and were satisfactory overall. However, outcomes for 16 to 18-year-olds at A level were an area for improvement and had been poor for some time. In 2008/09 overall success rates at advanced level improved and on long courses were satisfactory at slightly above averages for the sector. They continued to be good in work-based learning. However, despite significant improvement, they remain below national averages on A-level courses. Retention rates have improved, and in-year retention shows good, and improved, rates in 2009/10 compared with the same time in 2008/09.

Quality of provision

How much progress has the college made in improving the provision for key skills and functional skills?

Reasonable progress

The provision for key skills was an area for improvement at the inspection in 2008. Since then the college has implemented measures which are beginning to improve the provision. Enrolments are managed centrally; staff have regular meetings to review progress in meeting targets; the manager has introduced a standardised college monitoring tool; staff have had training in assessment and in teaching and learning; and members of teaching staff are expected to achieve a minimum of level 2 in adult literacy and numeracy. Since October 2009 two faculties have introduced a pilot scheme whereby they prepare students for the tests during the first six weeks of the programme. This has been successful and a significant number of learners had achieved test passes by mid-January 2010. Learners find the use of vocationally-specific subject matter in assignments particularly motivating. The college has identified that ineffective initial guidance has been a major factor in the low success rates at level 3 communications in 2008/09. The process is now more rigorous. The college is preparing for functional skills and is focusing well on the needs of learners in its preparation.

What progress has been made in developing more effective targets in individual learning plans and in monitoring learners' progress? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection the effectiveness of target setting was an area for development. Since then, members of staff have received training in this area, and the college has made reasonable progress. The setting of targets has improved overall, although a minority of targets continue to be too general. The college is preparing for learners' individual learning plans to be part of the college's virtual learning environment, so that learners and members of staff can all access them and they become live documents. In work-based learning, members of staff have improved the use of targets for basic skills, and monitor all targets on a monthly basis, intervening where it appears learners may be at risk of not completing their studies successfully. The individual learning plans on Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes show clearly the progress learners are making across all areas of their work. Learners are involved fully in the setting of their targets and know what progress they are making. The staff have implemented successfully a system of monitoring progress which focuses on aspects of 'Every Child Matters', which is particularly relevant for many learners on E2E programmes.

Leadership and management

How much progress has the college made in using self-assessment and implementing quality improvement action plans to improve the provision in subject areas? Reasonable progress

At the inspection in 2008 one subject area inspected was found inadequate, and the college had graded three other areas as inadequate. Since then the college has made reasonable progress. In the 2008/09 self-assessment report the college found that only one very small area of provision continued to be inadequate, and it is taking appropriate steps to rectify the specific issues that relate to that area. The college has restructured its lines of accountability and implemented revised quality improvement processes. These procedures involve greater use of management information to monitor progress and to identify the extent to which targets are being met. Learners have a greater involvement in monitoring their own progress and staff are alerted early in the year to learners at risk of not completing their studies successfully. Communication across the college has improved and the self-assessment process starts at course level. However, although in discussions staff can identify reasons for continuing unsatisfactory performance in a minority of subjects, the self-assessment report is not always sufficiently self-critical in identifying which subjects continue to perform below satisfactory levels, and in explaining why.

What progress has been made in sharing of good practice and focusing on learning in the observation of teaching and learning? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection, too much teaching and learning was no more than satisfactory and sharing of good practice in this area was insufficient. Since then the college has made reasonable progress. Managers have developed the observation matrix to include a greater emphasis on learning, with a summary of learning required as well as a summary of teaching. This has resulted in an increased focus on this aspect of the sessions. However, the reporting sometimes describes activity rather than evidence of actual learning, and inspectors found grades awarded to lessons over-generous at times. Too few observations report on the promotion of equality and diversity through the curriculum. The health and social care faculty has carried out substantial work to share good practice, and a series of planned and focused training events have been rolled out across the college so that an understanding of good practice is common. The work-based learning team have shared good practice in behaviour management in the classroom, where learners from E2E courses have moved into mainstream vocational courses. However, more needs to be done in order to share the good practice found in different subjects across the college.

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