

Central Bedfordshire College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: General Further Education College

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Central Bedfordshire College is a medium-sized general further education college with its main site in Dunstable. The majority of learners are adults following part-time courses. Approximately one quarter of learners are from minority ethnic backgrounds, significantly higher than the figure locally, and just under two thirds of learners are female. The majority of learners follow courses at foundation and intermediate levels.

The most recent full inspection report was published in August 2008. The college was graded satisfactory in its overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management. Seven subject areas were inspected: health, public services and care; arts, media and publishing; and preparation for life and work were graded good. Provision in hairdressing and beauty therapy; leisure, travel and tourism; and in business, administration and law were judged to be satisfactory. Provision in information and communication technology (ICT) was inadequate, but was reinspected in May 2009 and judged to be satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

<p>What progress has been made in using the outcomes of quality assurance effectively in improvement planning?</p>	<p>Reasonable progress</p>
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The college recognises that its current self-assessment report does not provide a sufficiently self-critical assessment of strengths and areas for improvement and is giving a high priority to improving the quality of the report for 2009/10. Procedures have been improved to provide a more inclusive approach to self-assessment; teachers say that they understand, and are more fully involved in the process than previously. The use of data to support judgements is more secure because managers understand data better; the views of stakeholders are taken into account at course team level, although it is not yet clear how this information will be incorporated into the self-assessment report for 2009/10. The quality improvement plan has been of limited value in identifying and rectifying areas for improvement. The college knows this and has therefore put in place a comprehensive system of monitoring arrangements to ensure that departments and course teams are tackling the key priorities of improving success rates and the quality of learners' experiences effectively.

The college has made a robust response to the issues which contributed to the poorer quality of its self-assessment report and quality improvement plan last year. It has implemented a series of well-considered changes to its quality procedures and is confident that these, together with changes to the management of quality throughout the college, will provide a secure foundation for future improvements.

What progress has been made in improving the provision in construction, judged to be inadequate in the college's self-assessment report? Significant progress

The self-assessment of the quality of provision in construction, based on outcomes in 2008/09, is accurate. Since then the college has made significant changes to management at section level and provided a stronger focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning through the appointment of a subject learning coach. Initial advice and guidance has improved, and teachers are using data more effectively to assess course performance. These changes have already had an impact: college data show that current in-year retention rates are much improved; learners who have completed their courses are demonstrating higher levels of achievement than previously and morale within the department is high. The quality of learning observations this year is much improved, resulting in a more realistic assessment of the quality of teaching and learning.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving success rates? Reasonable progress

Following a period of steady improvement since the last inspection, the long course success rate was well below the national figure in 2008/09. Success rates on courses in health and social care, and in arts and media were above average but success rates in AS- and A-level subjects, and on courses in construction and ICT, were very low. College data for the current year indicate a significant improvement of seven percentage points in the retention rate. The achievement data which are available so far also indicate an improving picture, enabling the college to predict with some confidence that its success rates in AS- and A-level subjects and on courses in construction will be much higher this year, and that the college's overall success rate will be comparable with that of similar colleges. In ICT, the poor achievement rate for adult learners on intermediate courses in the college's 'learning shops' continues to adversely affect success rates, which remain low.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in increasing work experience opportunities for learners aged 16 to 18? Significant progress

The college has developed still further the opportunities for learners so that the majority of learners aged 16 to 18 on full-time courses now undertake work experience. On most courses work experience features in assignments and is integrated carefully with other course components through schemes of work. Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have excellent opportunities to participate in a range of interesting and valuable placements. These learners are

assessed carefully and matched to placements where they can develop new skills successfully. Learners speak highly of both the quality of work experience and their enjoyment of it. Checks on the quality of work placements are made through course reviews and are thorough. Appropriate actions to safeguard learners whilst on placement have been implemented.

What progress has been made in sharing best practice in teaching and learning and improving the quality and consistency of lessons? Reasonable progress

The college's programme of activities to improve teaching and learning provides an appropriate range of activities and is supplemented by additional support for teachers who require it. Teachers who have been awarded outstanding grades in observations of their teaching have been used effectively to lead staff development sessions. The quality of teaching and learning continues to improve with college data for 2009/10 showing a higher proportion of lessons judged good or better compared with previous years. The analysis of the quality of learning is thorough, but the value of this analysis is reduced by variations in the rigour of lesson observations, particularly in relation to the extent to which the learning needs of different groups of learners are met. The college has recognised this issue and is confident that observations from the current cycle will provide a more secure assessment of the quality of learning.

What progress has the college made in extending the use of information learning technology (ILT) to support learning? Reasonable progress

The college has increased the amount and range of ILT equipment available for teachers and students to use, including additional interactive whiteboards and projectors in classrooms. The college has provided appropriate development activities for staff to familiarise themselves with the new technology and records how effectively teachers are using it through lesson observations. The use of ILT varies between different courses and on some courses remains underdeveloped.

The college re-launched its virtual learning environment (VLE) in September 2009 and reports that it is being used more regularly by staff and learners. A few course teams are making good use of the VLE but in general the materials which have been posted on it vary in quality and usefulness. The resource is not yet used to its full potential.

What progress has the college made in improving the use of targets in individual learning plans (ILPs) ? Reasonable progress

Since the last monitoring visit the college has implemented successfully a revised tutorial policy that includes the use of a standard ILP for all full-time and substantive part-time learners. Teachers have received helpful training in the use of the new ILP and tutorials are now observed as part of the college's extended quality assurance

arrangements. The college attributes the improvement in tutorials to be a major contributory factor to the improvement in retention rates this year.

The quality of target-setting contained within ILPs is variable across the college. In the best examples targets are specific, measurable and provide appropriate timescales for completion. However, in some instances learner targets are insufficiently precise to be of value in monitoring and assessing progress. The level of detail provided on ILPs is inconsistent; in the best examples prior attainment data, initial assessment results, support needs and target minimum grades are recorded carefully, but this is not the case on all courses.

Leadership and management

What progress has Central Bedfordshire College made in improving the rigour of development and operational planning? Reasonable progress

The strategic plan presents a well-considered statement of the college's long-term priorities. Where significant revisions have been required, for example in relation to plans to improve accommodation, the college has acted promptly to identify alternative ways in which both accommodation and the quality of learners' experiences can be improved. Operational planning at college level is clear and includes sufficient measurable and challenging targets, but key priorities were not always reflected in departmental and course action plans in 2008/09. The college met its target for the overall success rate in 2008/09 but not for long course success rates, which were below the national average.

Significant changes have been put into place for the current year's planning cycle, particularly in relation to the use of college performance data, but it is too early to judge the impact of these improvements on operational planning at department and course levels.

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