

# Exeter College

## Focused monitoring visit report

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## FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

### Context and focus of visit

Exeter College has been a tertiary college serving the city and environs of Exeter, Devon, for the last forty years. The college provides all post-compulsory education and training for the city. Most of the secondary schools outside the city boundary have a sixth form. The college has two major campuses in the city centre, at Hele Road and Queen Street, and two specialist training centres on the outskirts of the city.

Exeter College offers a wide curriculum across most subject areas and levels. The large majority of students aged 16 to 18 follow courses at advanced level. The college has around 10,000 students, split evenly between adults and students aged 16 to 18. Around 90% of the students are White British and the proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is higher than in the local population.

The college was last inspected in March 2008. Achievement and standards, quality of provision and overall effectiveness were judged good, as was the college's capacity to improve. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

### Themes

#### Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college leadership made in improving its self-assessment and improvement planning, and the impact these have on students?

Significant progress

The college now engages in highly insightful and penetrating self-assessment that leads clearly to specific strategies to improve outcomes for students. It knows itself well and has nurtured a culture of high expectation and ambition. These represent a significant change from the situation that pertained before and even at the time of the last inspection. Change is attributable in part, at least, to a number of new appointments at senior management, head of faculty and governing body level, all of whom are contributing to a more ambitious and refocused strategic ambition. For example, all reflective and critically evaluative activity now focuses on the student community and their learning, whereas previously the key performance indicator was the condition of the college as a business. Governors in particular are now much better equipped to analyse data and interrogate students' and subject areas' performance. Those areas of the college that are identified through incisive self-assessment as being in need of improvement are subject to varying degrees of 'intensive care' by the senior leadership team.

The college has reacted well to hearing that the Learning and Skills Council is no longer able to support its planned £100 million property strategy, and now has plans of its own to invest in a number of developments to further enhance students' experience.

## Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving the attainment of students' aged 16 to 18? Significant progress

Success rates for these students have risen eight percentage points since the last inspection at all three levels. At foundation level, success rates rose five points in 2008/09 to be at the national average for that year for general further education (GFE) colleges. At intermediate level, success rates for students aged 16 to 18 rose six percentage points, also arriving at the national average for colleges of this type. At advanced level, which represents by far the largest volume of students enrolled at the college, success rates for this age group rose six percentage points in 2008/09 to be seven points above the national average for GFE colleges. The college accepts that as a tertiary college it should compare its students' attainment at advanced level with those in sixth form colleges, and it does so systematically. An analysis of AS- and A-level results, where the comparison with sixth form colleges is more pertinent, shows that in 2008/09 Exeter College improved its success rates for this large cohort of students by six and four percentage points respectively, exceeding by some way the GFE national average and matching the national average for sixth form colleges.

What progress has been made in improving the attainment of adult students? Significant progress

For adult students, success rates have risen dramatically in the two years since the last inspection, albeit from a very low base. The rate of improvement has significantly exceeded the national rate. For some course levels, however, this is still not enough to take the college rate above, or even to, the respective national average for colleges of a similar type.

At foundation level, success rates rose eight points in 2008/09 but are still ten points below that year's national average for GFE colleges. At intermediate level, success rates for adults rose 13 points to be two points below the national average for similar colleges. At advanced level, however, success rates rose 14 percentage points in 2008/09 to be six points above the national averages for both GFE colleges and sixth form colleges.

What progress has been made in improving the relative attainment of different identified groups of students? Significant progress

The college's self-assessment report (SAR) analyses the variations in attainment between differently identified groups: ethnicity, diagnosed learning difficulty, disability, gender, and socio-economic background. The results of this analysis show that, in all aspects, the college is successfully and rapidly reducing unwarranted variations in attainment between different groups, although relative socio-economic deprivation remains a significant hindrance to parity of overall success. This latter group – identified by postcode origin – grew vastly in 2008/09 from 370 to 2,462 according to unverified college data. This fact confers further credit on the college's considerable achievement in raising this group's success rate by 12 percentage points in that same year.

What progress has been made in improving the progress made by students on advanced level courses from their starting points when they enter the college? Significant progress

In 2008/09 some 49% of all A level students gained a grade A or B, an improvement of eight percentage points on the previous year and three points above the previous year's national average for sixth form colleges. A very large majority of students on advanced level courses make outstanding progress and attain at a higher level than might be expected from their prior levels of attainment when they enter the college. An exception is students on BTEC national diploma courses, whose levels of attainment match statistical predictions.

### Quality of provision

What progress has been made in setting aspirational targets for students and monitoring their progress towards them? Reasonable progress

The college is extending existing processes to set both minimum and aspirational target grades for students on AS- and A-level courses and throughout its BTEC national courses. It is in the process of introducing a computer programme to enable teachers to monitor more easily students' progress against target grades. All students now have an electronic individual learning plan. Most students report that they have clear targets that help them to improve their performance and that tutors regularly review their performance against these. The college rightly points to improved in-year retention for the current academic year as evidence of the impact of these improved arrangements. Mechanisms to develop and share tutors' practices are clear and well considered. However, the college recognises that the precision and specificity of targets set for students is not yet of a consistently high standard across the college. In particular, the broadly average progress made by students on BTEC national diplomas is an acknowledged area for improvement given the better progress made by students on most other advanced level courses.

### Leadership and management

What progress has been made in developing a coherent curriculum across the city in collaboration with local schools? Significant progress

Collaboration with local schools in developing a coherent curriculum is much improved since the last inspection. The college and its partner schools take a well-conceived strategic overview of the development of its curriculum, as is demonstrated in both the breadth of the range of courses available and the very careful consideration of progression routes from these courses onto students' next steps into further education and training. An example of collaboration is the joint development of Diploma provision. The college has worked very closely with schools in Exeter, as part of the Exeter4Learning partnership, to offer 14 to 19 Diplomas that align with schools' existing specialisms. They have jointly put in place teaching and learning arrangements for these courses that meet students' needs very well. Communication between the college and partner schools is particularly good. The

headteacher of one of the partner schools points to the very significant rise in the proportion of students from her school staying on in education and training at the end of Year 11. This is compelling evidence of the success of the collaborative arrangements with the college to provide successful transition into post-16 education and to provide a coherent, well-planned 11 to 19 phase for students in and around Exeter.

How successfully does the college introduce innovative provision in order to cater for constantly changing needs in the regional community? Significant progress

The college has broadened its curriculum in a planned way to ensure that it can continue to play a leading role in providing all the tertiary education and training for the city of Exeter and its hinterland. Courses at foundation and intermediate level have expanded considerably, largely as a result of the successful raising of the post-16 rate of continuing education in the local authority from below 60% to around 80% over the last three years. The college has played a significant part in this story of successful engagement of young people in further education and training. Imaginative use of budgets and staffing has enabled the college to respond rapidly and creatively to the diverse needs of the local community, particularly in respect of a wide range of outreach work to re-engage young people who are not active in education, employment or training.

The college has also responded very well to the changing nature of the more established further education curriculum. It has successfully run the International Baccalaureate since 1993, and has recently extended and refined this offer. It has made strong links with local employers in almost all areas and, in particular, subjects such as music and sport have led to the establishment of thriving 'academies' for especially talented practitioners.

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