

Milton Keynes Adult Continuing Education

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Local authority

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Milton Keynes Adult Continuing Education (ACE) provides courses in all subject areas except social sciences. ACE employs 32 full-time management and administration staff, eight lead tutors and approximately 250 active part-time tutors during the year. In 2008/09 ACE ran 1,000 courses, from entry to advanced level. Around 60% of the provision is personal and community development learning, with around 3,300 learners. The great majority of learners are adults and on average 70% of the learners are female.

ACE was inspected in November 2008. The overall effectiveness and main aspects of the provision were judged to be satisfactory, as was the provision in four of the five subject areas inspected. Capacity to improve, equality of opportunity and visual arts were each judged to be good. This report focuses on the two mandatory themes of outcomes for learners and self-assessment and improvement planning, and on five further themes, three of which are areas for improvement identified at the last inspection.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has ACE made in its capacity to make and sustain improvements?	Reasonable progress
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At the last inspection, self-assessment and quality improvement arrangements were judged to have worked well to improve the provision. In its current self-assessment, ACE judges that while its overall effectiveness remains satisfactory, some contributory judgements have improved to good.

The self-assessment process remains wholly inclusive; the self-assessment report (SAR) is broadly accurate, but insufficiently detailed in parts. It was written in the course of staff workshops.

Evidence-gathering systems are generally well developed. ACE is developing a strong focus on analysing and monitoring learners as they progress through their course. The analysis of, and response to, learners' views are now more thorough, frequent and informative. Tutors have improved opportunities to contribute to ACE's self-assessment through the tutors' summary course reviews.

Improvement planning is concise and well focused. The achievement of targets is monitored well through regular team meetings. Developments and improvements prompted by the improvement plan are fed back to learners and staff through a good range of media and forums.

The SAR has insufficient focus on the quality of teaching and learning. Data in the SAR, for example on success rates, are often presented without sufficient evaluation of the reasons for improvement or deterioration.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has ACE made in improving outcomes for learners?	Reasonable progress
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Outcomes for learners were satisfactory at the last inspection but success rates on intermediate level accredited courses were low.

Intermediate level success rates have since improved to around the national average. In 2008/09 the success rate on intermediate courses rose from 50% to 78% for 16 to 18-year-olds and from 68% to 74% for adult learners. ACE has been applying more stringent initial assessment practice to identify whether applicants have the capacity to succeed at intermediate level. Some prospective learners have been referred instead to foundation level literacy programmes, which better match their needs.

Success rates on long learner responsive courses have progressively improved over three years to five percentage points above the national average. By contrast, success rates on all short courses have remained low with little sign of improvement. The success rate for short courses is 15 percentage points below the national average. ACE has identified the reasons for underperformance and taken action to improve. It has introduced some new courses better suited to learners' circumstances and cancelled some which were underperforming.

Learners interviewed during the visit were confident and well motivated, all expressing a clear purpose for, enjoyment and interest in, learning.

Quality of provision

What progress has ACE made in improving the proportion of good or better teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection the quality of teaching and learning was judged to be satisfactory. Effective peer review arrangements with other training providers have helped to support improvements such as a more rigorous system for observing and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning. The number of observation grades being moderated has increased and the consistency of grading between observers has consequently improved. Training has helped observers make clearer judgments in observation records. Nevertheless, in a few of the records seen the link between the grade awarded and the underpinning evidence was not sufficiently clear and in some others there was insufficient focus on learning.

Support for individual tutors to improve teaching and learning is appropriately focused. The number of good or better grades awarded has increased by nine

percentage points since the previous inspection, but is still below the national average.

ACE recognises that its relatively low teaching and learning profile reflects a policy of focusing observations and support on teaching staff previously graded as satisfactory or inadequate. ACE has not undertaken a wider review of the quality of teaching and learning and it has insufficient knowledge of the service's key strengths and areas for improvement in this area.

What progress has ACE made in improving the system for recognising and recording learners' progress and achievement?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection the implementation and procedures for the recognition and recording of progress and achievement (RARPA) were incomplete.

Through a productive partnership with other providers, ACE has developed the RARPA process across the provision, although it recognises that that there is still some variability of practice between curriculum areas. The quality of RARPA is now monitored well through observation of the teaching and learning process, and actions for improvement are clear.

Learners now use a simple numerical scoring system to assess their skill level against group and individual targets at the beginning, middle and end of the course. The system provides a useful indicator for learners and tutors on how much knowledge is being acquired and the extent of progress made. In general, tutors have a good understanding of each learner's needs, but the standard of individual target setting and the quality of progress reviews vary from very good to weak.

Learners interviewed during inspection were very positive about their course, progress, quality of support and overall experience of learning. These positive views were mirrored in additional learner views collected by the online questionnaire in the period leading up to, and during, the inspection.

Leadership and management

What progress has ACE made in the use of management information at curriculum level?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, the use of management information at curriculum level was not established and ACE managers did not have complete confidence in the reliability of success rates on non-accredited courses.

Over the past 18 months, the range of data and information available at curriculum level have increased significantly to include detailed current and termly data on aspects of course performance including learners' success, retention and attendance rates. Curriculum managers are becoming more adept at analysing this information and requesting particular data sets to inform particular improvement actions and

planning. Data have helped to identify underperformance more clearly. Some poorly performing classes have been closed.

Data on learners' success rates are now generally reliable and are used well by managers to monitor performance, but they are not routinely shared with all tutors. Success rate data on non-accredited courses appear to be broadly accurate in most curriculum areas. ACE recognises that the consistency and implementation of standards used to judge progress and achievement on non-accredited courses require further development.

What progress has ACE made in its partnership arrangements?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, ACE's network of partnership arrangements was judged to be good. These arrangements have been further developed.

ACE has maintained and expanded its network of cross-sector partnerships with an extensive range of organisations. It is closely involved in helping realise local development initiatives. It works effectively with specialist agencies and other partners to increase training opportunities for under-represented groups, such as homeless and vulnerable adults.

The service remains part of an effective peer review group comprising local learning providers. The group is used well to provide constructive critique of ACE's self-assessment and action planning. The quality of communication with Milton Keynes Council senior officers remains strong. The recent strategy for well-being offered through libraries and lifelong learning links well with the skills strategy including development plans for adult learning and English for speakers of other languages.

What progress has ACE made in further improving its safeguarding arrangements?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, safeguarding arrangements were judged to be satisfactory. ACE has continued to maintain appropriate safeguarding arrangements since that time, in line with emerging legislation. ACE is in the process of updating all tutors' Criminal Records Bureau checks and clarifying policies and procedures in line with the recently revised Milton Keynes Council safeguarding procedures. Existing staff have undertaken appropriate training and new staff receive safeguarding information at induction. Staff have a good awareness of how to respond in the event of any safeguarding-related incidents.

Health and safety risk assessments are maintained well. Support arrangements for learners with additional learning requirements are well established and closely monitored for quality.

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