

Forster Community College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Established 28 years ago, Forster Community College (FCC), formerly known as Bradford Cathedral Centre, is a voluntary and community sector provider. FCC provides learning activities for disadvantaged groups, many of whom face issues of poverty, ill health, disability, and exclusion from the world of work. Learning programmes are offered at its main site, at outreach centres and through several partner providers. FCC offers further education (FE) and Personal and Community Development Learning (PCDL) through courses in eight subject areas funded by West Yorkshire LSC or successor organisations. FCC delivers the PCDL programmes through subcontracting arrangements with four other providers. A large part of the provision is Skills for Life and provision below level 2. FCC delivers New Deal training under subcontract arrangements and has recently been awarded a Train to Gain contract.

FCC was last inspected in June 2007; all aspects of the provision were judged to be satisfactory except equality of opportunity which was good. This focused monitoring visit follows a previous monitoring visit in May 2008, when FCC was judged to have made reasonable progress in four areas and insufficient progress in two.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What improvements have been made to the self-assessment process? Are they improving the quality of provision? Reasonable progress

Staff and partners are effectively involved in the self-assessment process but the involvement of learners and employers is insufficiently developed. Trustees are much more proactive with one having direct responsibility for reporting on quality improvement. Departmental self-assessment reports effectively contribute to FCC's overall self-assessment, which now links to other quality improvement activities. Data are used much more effectively to inform the judgements. The self-assessment report is comprehensive in its scope and coverage of the provision. The report is self-critical; judgements are clear and well supported by the evidence. However, it does not cover all the wider outcomes for learners. In subject areas with notices to improve, low success rates are not identified as areas for improvement. The report is internally and externally validated. An appropriate quality improvement plan is cross-referenced to the self-assessment report and to key strategic outcomes. Areas for improvement in subject areas do not appear in the quality improvement plan but are addressed through departmental action plans. Actions are specific and measurable with clear monitoring and accountabilities identified. Milestones are not always sequential and the recording of progress and achievement are sometimes unclear. The self-assessment report correctly identifies the use of learners' views as an area

for improvement but does not identify weaknesses in the monitoring of learners' progress.

Outcomes for learners

Have the performance rates of learners continued to improve across all of FCCs provision? Are they now in line or above national average? Reasonable progress

Success rates for adult learners have improved substantially from an extremely low base. For long courses, the success rate has improved from 35% in 2006/07 to 61% in 2008/09 but is still eight percentage points below the national average. College data for 2009/10 indicate the success rate has improved further and is now in line with the national average for the previous year. The short-course success rate has improved significantly and is in line with the national average. Success rates for Skills for Life have improved significantly but remain below the national average. Success rates for learners from minority ethnic groups have improved but most achieve less well than White British learners. FCC has discontinued provision for learners aged 16 to 18. During 2009/10 one of FCC's notices to improve has been lifted but one remains in force. Performance on PCDL provision has been maintained at high levels. Progression and achievement rates for learners on Entry to Employment (E2E) courses have improved and are satisfactory but have declined during the current year. For tier-three E2E learners progression and achievement are very good. Progression to jobs for New Deal participants is satisfactory. Overall success rates and completion within planned end dates for Train to Gain learners have improved and are in line with national average.

Are the new procedures to observe the quality of teaching and learning working effectively? Are they helping to improve teaching practice and the quality of the learner's experience? Reasonable progress

The introduction of a new system to monitor the quality of teaching, training and assessment provides opportunities to assess the performance of all tutors at the main centre and in the outreach centres. The system is now more thorough with a plan to observe all tutors twice a year without prior notification. In the latest round of observations, the two designated observers have assessed most tutors. Plans are in place to increase the number of observers, and training has begun, including the use of joint observations to ensure consistency of practice across the provision. Currently tutorials are not part of the observation process. The observation records do not always fully justify the grade awarded with insufficient focus on learning and learners' views of the quality of sessions. In the joint observations, inspectors were in broad agreement with the two college observers on the key strengths and areas for development in each session. The use of observation records to inform self-assessment is in the early stages of development. A summary of the grades awarded are included but insufficient use is made of qualitative information in the development of strategies and action plans for staff development, sharing good

practice and further improving the standards of delivery. The outcomes of lesson observations are not used to set individual targets.

How effective are FCCs arrangements for monitoring learners' progress from initial assessment through to completion and progression? Insufficient progress

The process for initial and diagnostic assessment has improved and an online system is used well to develop performance targets for learners and ensure they are enrolled on the right level of course. A new individual learning plan (ILP) has been developed and is now used on all courses. However, as recognised by the college, the process needs to be standardised as different tutors have developed their own additional systems to monitor learners' progress. This causes duplication and learners' records indicate that staff are not accurately completing ILPs, often key information is omitted and sections are left blank. A plan is in place to introduce an electronic ILP to ensure greater consistency across the provision. The setting of learners' specific targets with clear actions and dates for completion is poor and an area that requires significant improvement. On non-accredited courses, the use of recognising and recording progress and achievement is weak. It is not clear from the records seen on the visit what progress and achievement individual learners have made during their course.

What progress has been made in improving the involvement and feedback of users? Insufficient progress

In the last year, a number of internal learner questionnaires have been completed, covering aspects such as safety, advice and guidance, and general learners' issues. However, the questions are not sufficiently specific to support the college in its quality improvement strategy. In most of the surveys, the low proportion of learners completing the questionnaires makes the results statistically invalid. Learners who have completed the surveys and responded to requests for feedback are positive about their experiences. A small number of learners have not been able to access opportunities to provide feedback. Managers have taken actions as a result of informal meetings with learners and issues raised through the suggestions box. However, there are no summary records of the issues raised, the actions taken, or how managers have communicated these to learners. Managers are highly visible throughout the college and regularly chat to individual learners about their experiences. Managers do take action on learners' comments, and as a result have improved site security, arrangements in the café, and cleanliness of the toilet facilities. However, there is no evidence of how learners have had the opportunity to comment about the quality of their course or how their views contribute to self-assessment and quality improvement.

Have the arrangements for quality assurance improved? Do they cover all aspects of the learning and training process? Reasonable progress

An annual plan for quality assurance has been introduced during 2009/10, which includes all key quality assurance activities organised during each month of the year. The activities cover most aspects of learning and training but arrangements to gather the views of learners and employers have yet to be established. An appropriate range of policies and procedures have been developed and implemented. In order to support these, a series of helpful staff handbooks have been produced and staff have been trained in their use. Session plans and schemes of work have been standardised but they are not always completed consistently. Observation of teaching and learning has been introduced. The use and analysis of data has significantly improved. A good range of reports enable managers to identify and act quickly on performance issues. Performance management of staff has improved through regular supervision meetings. Most success rates have improved. The sharing of good practice internally has helped to improve the approach to teaching Skills for Life programmes. FCC has contributed to the sharing of good practice in its peer reference group. While some targets are set in the quality improvement plan and for teams, the use of target setting at an individual level is not well developed.

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