

Taunton's College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Sixth form college

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Taunton's College is a medium-sized sixth form college located in Southampton. Around 28% of students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, compared with 17% in the local population in 2007. In 2009, the unemployment rate in Southampton was similar to that found nationally. Approximately half of the students attending the college are in receipt of education maintenance allowance. The college offers courses in 11 of the 15 sector subject areas and provision is available at all levels, from entry level to advanced level. In 2009/10, the college enrolled 1,409 students on full-time programmes and 76 adults mainly on part-time evening programmes. Around three quarters of the students aged 16 to 18 follow programmes at advanced level.

The college was inspected in October 2007. The college's overall effectiveness was judged to be good, as was its capacity to improve, leadership and management, and quality of provision. Achievement and standards were satisfactory and equality of opportunity was outstanding. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in improving the consistency and impact of quality assurance procedures and self-assessment, including at curriculum level?	Significant progress
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The college has made considerable improvements to its quality assurance arrangements to ensure greater consistency across the provision. Internal quality reviews of curriculum areas are more robust and include evidence from student focus groups, interviews with staff and scrutiny of students' work, as well as lesson observation grades. Actions for improvement are clear, focused and time constrained. A programme of 'breakfast clubs', involving teaching staff, middle managers and senior managers, leads to a prompt and effective response to emerging concerns within departments. Early signs of improvement in underperforming curriculum areas are evident in improved teaching, learning and retention of students.

The college has improved access to management information significantly through the development of the managed learning environment (MLE). Good use is made of accurate data to set targets for managers, staff and students. Managers regularly review progress against targets and are able to identify and address emerging areas for concern early. Self-assessment processes are thorough and curriculum reports are closely scrutinised. The self-assessment report is subject to comprehensive internal moderation prior to rigorous external review. Quality improvement plans are detailed and more consistent. Managers pay close attention to monitoring the impact of actions on improvement.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made since the last inspection in improving success rates? Reasonable progress

Success rates for students, the large majority of whom are aged 16 to 18, on long courses increased by nine percentage points since the previous inspection. Success rates on long courses at intermediate and advanced level increased through improvements in both retention and achievement, but declined for the small proportion of students at foundation level. However, success rates at all levels are still below national averages. Success rates for the small number of adults declined, due mainly to poor achievement on the GCSE mathematics course. A high proportion of students join the college with relatively low levels of attainment. Overall, students made satisfactory progress in 2008/09 compared with their starting points, and also when contextual factors were taken into consideration. However, this declined from the previous year.

There are no significant differences in success rates for groups with ethnic minority backgrounds, but males achieve better than females. Enrolments in 2009/10 have increased by 11% after two years of decline. College data indicate an improvement in retention in the current year. Success rates for learners on the new Train to Gain programmes in health and social care were above national averages in 2008/09.

What progress has been made in improving success rates for key or functional skills, particularly literacy and numeracy? Significant progress

The college has successfully introduced functional skills at foundation and intermediate level, and will complete the phasing out of key skills at advanced level in the current year. In 2008/09, all students at entry level following the skills for working life programme achieved their qualification. The number of students taking functional skills programmes increased considerably. Success rates for students on functional skills programmes in English at foundation and intermediate level were high at over 70%. Although the success rate for the mathematics programme at level 1 was also high at 82%, it was low at intermediate level, as was the rate for information and communication technology (ICT). In 2009/10, functional skills at intermediate level in English and mathematics have been embedded in the vocational programmes. At advanced level all students are taking the key skills qualification in communications, although a small number were successful. The college has improved its provision for students with a need for training in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), with success rates above average in 2008/09 at 87%.

Quality of provision

What actions have been taken to improve lesson-planning strategies and teachers' techniques for assessing learning within lessons?

Reasonable progress

The college has improved the rigour of its lesson observation scheme. It has also further developed a broad range of in-house training to respond to areas for improvement identified, and to raise the quality of teaching and learning. Managers identify examples of best practice and use peer observations to enable staff to share ideas and to improve their own planning and teaching skills. The small number of teachers whose lessons have been judged inadequate are given appropriate individual support and guidance. Frequent monitoring of their progress ensures that they develop their skills.

Recent lesson observation reports indicate that lesson planning is now more thorough and more account is taken of the diverse needs of individual students. Teachers now use a wider range of teaching strategies and learning activities. More teachers are using a greater variety of techniques for assessing learning within lessons, including the use of quizzes and effective use of information and learning technology (ILT). However, the college recognises that practice varies across provision, and that more work is needed to improve those teachers whose lessons are judged satisfactory.

What actions have been taken to improve the use of information and learning technology (ILT) for teaching and learning since the last inspection?

Reasonable progress

Students speak positively about the increasing use of ILT by teachers in lessons. Staff now have access to ILT facilities in all teaching rooms, and have received in-house training on how to maximise the use of ILT in their lessons. The college has improved the range and number of computers available for students in class rooms and in the open-access library. Wireless technology, of which students are beginning to make use, is now available in some parts of the college. College records show an increase in computer usage in lessons and in the library. However, there is insufficient guidance available for students on the safe use of information and communication technology (ICT).

The college has further developed the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) by staff and students, since it was introduced in September 2008. However, students report that access to the system is too slow, and sometimes unreliable. Many staff make good use of the VLE to set assignments and homework, and to monitor the progress and attendance of students. Although use of the VLE by students has improved over the last year, it remains low.

Leadership and management

What actions have been taken to raise the quality of provision in the departments of science and information technology (IT)?

Reasonable
progress

Following the last inspection, senior managers have focused on raising the quality of provision of science and IT. In 2008/09, success rates for half the science courses improved significantly. However, rates overall in the sciences, and in IT, were still below average and students made insufficient progress compared with their starting points.

In September 2009, the college appointed a new manager of the science department, and transferred the IT courses into the business department. Managers have since taken effective actions to raise the quality of provision, including: more frequent lesson observations resulting in robust actions for improvement; extra support for staff through internal and external development and training; sharing of good practice through peer observations; good use of 'breakfast clubs'; and, a rigorous internal quality review.

Although it is still too early to fully judge the effectiveness of these actions, some improvements can already be seen. For example, retention rates in the current year for most courses have improved to, or slightly above, national averages. The enhanced college lesson observation scheme indicates that the quality of teaching and learning in the two areas has improved, with an increase in lessons graded good or better, and no unsatisfactory lessons observed.

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