

Oaklands College

Focused reinspection monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 130723

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Last day of inspection: 01 July 2010

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Oaklands College is a large general further education college with four main campuses in mid and south Hertfordshire. It offers courses in all 15 subject areas. The college has its own work-based learning contract and also provides Train to Gain, Entry to Employment and informal adult learning provision. Its mission is to provide 'outstanding learning opportunities and training solutions within a vibrant inclusive college experience, leading to recognised qualifications and outcomes that contribute to personal development, and the economic growth and social well-being of our community'.

The most recent inspection report was published in January 2010. Inspectors judged the college's overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management to be good. Of the five subject areas considered, inspectors judged health and social care, construction learner responsive provision, performing arts and media, and literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) to be good. They judged construction employer responsive provision to be inadequate.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college made through its self-assessment process and quality improvement plans to improve the accessibility to and ease of use of management information data?	Reasonable progress
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The information services unit provides data summary sheets for staff to use when completing their programme logs. The quality team is developing data packs so that managers and self-assessment writers can access data more readily and use them more consistently. Senior managers, and more recently middle managers, use the monthly quality performance indicator matrix to analyse ratings for a wide range of measures for each subject area. A few managers lack the skills to examine the more detailed data below this summary overview. The college has obtained new software that is very easy to use and assists managers' access to data down to the level of learners' information. Staff development on this new system, which should be in full use by September 2010, is imminent and so it is too soon to evaluate its effectiveness. Managers have made improvements to pass rates in 2009/10 compared with 2008/09, following their analysis of data and subsequent successful implementation of action plans. The relevant target in the quality improvement plan refers to improving the accessibility and user-friendliness of management information data, but not to increasing its effective use by all managers to improve provision for learners.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made to improve success rates in key/functional skills, short courses and in AS and GCE A-level sociology and law?	Reasonable progress
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According to the most recent in-year college data, success rates on key/functional skills courses have increased compared with the final success rates for 2008/09 at foundation level, but they are very low at intermediate level, except for information and communication technology. Managers have provided much staff development to improve teachers' understanding of functional skills and how best to teach and assess them, but are not confident that all teachers have the ability to embed functional skills within their subject areas.

The most recent college data for the latest 2009/10 completions, indicate success rates on all short courses are significantly higher than in 2008/09, because pass rates are higher. Teachers are more aware of the recording of non-accredited achievement and its appropriate use for learners unlikely to obtain a qualification. Staff track learners' progress more rigorously and ensure they are on the most appropriate course.

The college predicts success rates in AS and GCE A-level sociology and law will increase in 2009/10 to well above national averages. January 2010 module results indicate an increase in the law pass rate but a decline in the sociology pass rate. Managers have resolved the major law and sociology staffing issues that existed in 2008/09.

What progress has the college made to improve success rates and timely completions on apprentice, advanced apprentice and Train to Gain provision?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates and timely completion rates on the substantial Train to Gain provision, according to recent data, have increased compared with the final data for 2008/09 and are close to national averages. The overall success rates and timely completion rates for the much lower number of apprentices and advanced apprentices, according to recent data, are very low compared with the final data for 2008/09 and with national averages. Following an initial assessment of skills and analysis of a three-day diary, assessors enrol learners onto more appropriate courses. Assessors monitor learners' progress monthly through internal reviews. Managers have trained assessors to improve their target setting and to focus on increasing learners' completion within the expected timescale. They have revised the quality assurance manual, but not all assessors use this sufficiently rigorously. Staff monitor learners' absences more closely and inform employers of learners' progress better than they did previously. Employers are more aware of their rights and responsibilities through a service level agreement.

What progress has the college made to increase pass rates on long courses at advanced level for learners aged 16 to 18 and at foundation and intermediate levels for adult learners? Reasonable progress

Managers and teachers predict that success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 on advanced level long courses will increase substantially in 2009/10. Staff have used individual learning plans, individual tutorials, minimum achievable grades and more rigorous tracking of learners' progress as ways to improve learners' pass rates. In-year retention rates at this level, however, are lower than in 2008/09 and so pass rates have to rise substantially if the predicted increase in success rates is to be achieved. Staff predict pass rates will increase by 12 percentage points. Managers expect the three-year trend of increasing success rates at advanced level for learners aged 16 to 18 will continue.

Long course pass rates for adults at foundation and intermediate levels were low in 2008/09. Most learners at entry level did not complete in the time allotted. Staff have improved learners' learning aims. Current data indicate pass rates for foundation level ESOL to be similar to those for 2008/09. The most recent in-year college data, however, indicate increased pass rates compared with those for 2008/09 on literacy and numeracy courses at foundation and intermediate levels.

What progress has the college made to increase the progress made by learners aged 16 to 18 on AS and GCE A-level courses, compared with their prior attainment? Reasonable progress

The outcomes of the module examinations taken in January 2010 indicate a good increase in pass rates compared with those in January 2009. The pass rate in each subject increased, except for sociology. The proportion of high grades in sociology increased substantially, whereas the proportion of high grades in law declined slightly. The proportion of high grades obtained in the January 2010 modules compared with January 2009 increased in three subjects and decreased in four subjects. The predicted proportion of high grades for 2009/10 is similar to that obtained in 2008/09. Staff undertake termly reviews and agree appropriate action plans for learners at risk. They have made better use of the 20 guided learning hours available per subject to support learners and to challenge them to reach higher grades. Internal lesson observations indicate improved teaching and learning. Staff use the induction assignments to ensure learners are aware of the increase in standards required between intermediate and advanced levels and to advise learners of more appropriate courses.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in completing equality impact assessments and in developing greater consistency in the promotion and reinforcement of equality and diversity within subject areas? Reasonable progress

All equality and diversity policies and procedures are in place and managers review them annually. Managers proposed a single equality scheme in October 2009 and, following external and internal consultation, governors approved it in May 2010. Within subject areas, managers have not fully embedded the scheme and not all staff have implemented it. The action plan for the single equality scheme is very clear and includes the six equality characteristics. Managers have completed equality impact assessments of most college policies. They have accepted the majority of these and have referred three for further refinement. They expect to complete the remaining policy assessments, including that for the equality and diversity policy by the end of July 2010. Managers have improved the focus on equality and diversity in risk assessments, visit planners and marketing materials. Most subject areas have included equality and diversity matters more fully and appropriately since the last inspection. In other areas, such as construction, land-based and engineering, however, staff have still to embed equality and diversity aspects consistently into schemes of work, lesson plans and the curriculum. Learners have become more aware of equality and diversity issues through induction, equality and diversity week, tutorials, and the learners' handbook.

What progress has the college made to improve the overall effectiveness of employer responsive provision in construction? Reasonable progress

The college has improved outcomes for learners on Train to Gain courses and their success rates are now high. On apprenticeship programmes, staff have made several changes to improve the monitoring of learners' progress. They have revised the form used to review and record learners' progress and reviews are now more beneficial to learners. The quality of reviews, however, is variable between different occupational areas. In a few instances, reviews are insufficiently detailed and targets are too vague and general. Staff have improved the monitoring of learners' progress towards their achievement of key skill qualifications. Staff have received useful training to improve their teaching of key skills. It is too early to judge the impact of these changes on learners' success rates, which remain low for both overall and timely measures. Learners now have a better understanding and are more aware of their personal responsibilities concerning health and safety. Employers and supervisors contribute to learners' progress reviews and assessors inform them about learners' progress. Staff have improved assessment planning and employers are becoming more involved in this process. Staff often miss, however, the opportunities for assessment in the workplace.

What progress has the college made to improve communication with employers, improve the feedback on apprentices' progress and improve the involvement employers have in reviewing apprentices' progress?

Reasonable
progress

The effectiveness of communication with employers varies between subject areas. Whilst there are many examples of good practice in individual cases, managers do not evaluate fully the effectiveness of communication with employers across the college. Managers recognise that they have more work to do to communicate and engage with a wider range of employers to enhance learners' learning experience. They are currently revising the college's employer engagement strategy.

Employers are now more involved in reviewing apprentices' progress and they receive copies of completed reviews. At each review, staff seek and record employer's views. Employers can set targets for learners to achieve and can discuss any areas of concern with college assessors. Employers speak highly of the support provided by college assessors, although in a few cases, assessors do not make employers sufficiently aware of what apprentices are required to do to achieve their qualifications.

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