

Hertford Regional College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Philippa Francis HMI

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Type of provider: General Further Education college

Address: Broxbourne Campus
Turnford
Broxbourne
Hertfordshire
EN10 6AE

Telephone number: 01992 411400

FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Hertford Regional College is a medium-sized further education college serving Hertfordshire and neighbouring authorities. It has main sites in Broxbourne and Ware and has learning centres in Bishops Stortford and Waltham Cross. The college offers courses in all subject areas except land-based studies. In a few subjects, numbers of learners are small. The college no longer offers GCE A- and AS-level courses. The majority of learners are from Hertfordshire but learners also travel from Enfield, Essex and other north London areas

The college enrolls approximately 3,000 full-time learners, mostly aged 16 to 18. Nearly 8,000 learners, mainly adult, are on part-time courses. The college trains over 400 apprentices. Around 600 school pupils are on part-time courses. Over 1,200 employed learners are on Train to Gain programmes. Ofsted last inspected the college in February 2009. The college's overall effectiveness and all aspect grades were satisfactory. Two subjects were judged as good and four were satisfactory. The monitoring visit focused on the areas identified for improvement at the last inspection.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

To what extent have the effectiveness of actions for improvement and the accuracy and rigour of self-assessment improved? **Reasonable progress**

Since the last inspection, the self-assessment process has undergone considerable revision. Course team leaders are now fully involved in evaluating their courses, through strengthening of the course review process, although some are more confident and skilled at this than others. Departmental self-assessment reports are increasingly succinct and evaluative, largely because of the support and challenge provided by managers to ensure that evidence supports judgements well. Effective use of data is part of the evaluation of most provision. However, managers recognise that the use of data to evaluate the performance of different groups of learners and to assess the progress learners make compared to their prior attainment is an area for further development. Evaluation of employer responsive provision is not always sufficiently explicit within subject reports. The summary self-assessment report for 2008/09 provides a realistic appraisal of the college's performance, based on the evidence available during the visit. Whilst there are mechanisms in place to gather learners' views, plans are in place to draw these together more effectively to ensure comprehensive use in the self-assessment process.

The link between curriculum self-assessment and improvement plans is stronger because of the clear identification and close linking of areas for improvement to appropriate actions. The rigour in monitoring these action plans has increased over

the last year, particularly where concerns about the rate of improvement exist. In several underperforming areas, this has led to rapid progress and improvement but, in a few cases, improvement is less substantial with actions carried forward rather than successfully completed.

Outcomes for learners

Have success rates and learners' rate of progress, particularly for college-based provision, increased, including for minority ethnic groups? Is there less variation between success rates for different subjects? **Reasonable progress**

Emerging college data, based on approximately three-quarters of results recorded for 2009/10, indicate an increase in success rates compared with 2008/09. The rise is due to substantial increases in pass rates as retention rates are similar to previous years. Provisional success rates in 2009/10 at almost all levels are close to or above national averages. Based on college data, success rates on entry level courses for learners aged 16 to 18 have declined between 2007/08 and 2009/10 to be low. Success rates for learners from a Caribbean background are close to their low national average but are consistently below those for learners from a White British background. Success rates in the previously underperforming subjects of engineering, preparation for life and work and business, have generally increased in 2009/10 to be mostly above national averages. In 2008/09, the majority of learners aged 16 to 18 on advanced level provision made slightly better than expected progress when compared with their prior attainment.

According to college data for 2009/10, success rates for apprentices have increased compared with 2008/09 and are now at or above national averages. A greater number of apprentices complete their courses within the time allocated. Success rates for Train to Gain courses in 2009/10 are similar to those for 2008/09 and are above the national average.

Quality of provision

What improvement has been made to the quality and effectiveness of theory lessons? **Reasonable progress**

Learners' satisfaction with their theory lessons is less than that for their practical lessons but they find their involvement in theory lessons improved in 2009/10. Teachers took part in a wide range of staff development activities during the summer of 2009 to improve teaching and learning, particularly in theory lessons. During 2009/10, based on internal lesson observation outcomes, advanced teaching and learning practitioners adjusted the focus of staff development to meet better the needs of teachers. In the summer of 2010, the emphasis of staff development in teaching and learning was on the best use of the many new resources available to

teachers and learners. The proportion of good or better theory lessons observed in 2009/10, using a much larger sample, was slightly higher than in 2008/09. Managers have increased the focus on improving teaching and learning by weaker teachers successfully. A main area for improvement for most teachers remains in the effective use of questioning.

What progress has been made in measuring participation rates and the impact on learners' personal and social development of the enrichment programme?

Reasonable progress

During 2009/10, for the first time, the recording of the number of learners participating in the range of cross college and departmental enrichment activities took place, allowing managers to assess take up of each activity. Most departments make good use of trips and visits, which are popular and have high participation rates. Opportunities are fewer for learners to participate in cross-college clubs or societies. The use of plasma screens, the student intranet and the productive work of liaison officers ensure events are well publicised. Based on college data for 2009/10, around a fifth of full-time learners, aged 16 to 18 took part in some form of sport; around half of all full-time learners participated in a diversity week and a high percentage of learners from most courses took part in health and well-being events. Feedback from learners following these events is highly positive but is often from a relatively small sample of participants. By comparison, a much larger survey of learners' views in 2009/10 indicates a lower rate of satisfaction in response to questions about their enjoyment of extra activities when compared with the previous year's results.

How effective are individual learning plans in helping learners reach their full potential? Has target setting for learners improved?

Reasonable progress

Managers devised new individual learning plan and target setting processes in May 2009 and implemented these in September 2009. Although staff used this system very well in certain subject areas, such as engineering and hairdressing and beauty therapy, this was not the case in all subject areas. Towards the end of 2009/10, managers noted that the implementation and usefulness of the individual learning plan and target setting processes were inconsistent and they introduced an improved scheme for 2009/10. This addresses many of the concerns of the previous processes and includes systematic monitoring of the quality of the individual learning plans and learners' targets. Subject teachers now agree subject targets with learners and monitor progress termly. All learners receive a risk rating based on the likelihood of successful completion. Personal tutors provide more frequent monitoring of learners' general progress. However, it is too early to judge the impact or effectiveness of these actions. Managers consider that one of the reasons for the apparent increase in pass rates in 2009/10 is the support given to learners identified as at risk of not completing their course successfully.

Leadership and management

What improvements have been made to quality assurance arrangements including the monitoring and evaluation of aspects of provision?

Reasonable progress

The annual cycle of quality assurance activities is mostly comprehensive and well established. These arrangements for employer responsive provision are less explicit than for college-based provision. Managers have reinforced the importance of implementing the procedures rigorously across all of the college's work over the last year in order to reduce the difference in quality between subject areas. The various course management processes are audited appropriately. In a few cases, such as in the use of individual learning plans, audits have revealed some marked differences in quality, in particular in the use of target setting. However, senior managers and middle managers use audit findings constructively to support staff to develop their skills and share best practice.

The process of observing lessons, as part of quality assurance procedures, covers almost all teachers. Good use of the findings helps teachers as well as informing self-assessment. Managers have reviewed and refined the process over the last year. Subject specialist observers, rather than generic observers, carry out lesson observations ensuring a focus on attainment. Their findings are very relevant and detailed but do not always correlate with their grade judgements. Managers standardise outcomes effectively through joint observations and monitoring of observation reports.

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester, M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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