

# Basingstoke College of Technology

## Focused monitoring visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 130688

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**Last day of inspection:** 3 February 2011

**Type of provider:** General further education college

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## FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

### Context and focus of visit

Basingstoke College of Technology is located in the centre of Basingstoke, with additional sites for engineering and construction, a recently opened business training centre and outreach facilities throughout the borough. In 2009/10 around 6,500 students took courses at the college, with 2,300 full-time students and a third of all students being aged 16 to 18. The college offers courses in all subject areas, along with a substantial employer responsive programme and a variety of courses for students aged 14 to 16.

At the previous inspection in June 2009 all main aspects of the college's performance were graded as satisfactory. Of the six subject areas inspected, three were graded good (health and social care; engineering; hair and beauty) and three satisfactory (hospitality and catering; art, design, media and music; literacy and numeracy). As well as focusing on the areas for improvement noted at the previous inspection, the state of the main campus was examined at this visit, as it had been a recurring area of concern in inspection reports and the college's self-assessment.

### Themes

#### Self-assessment and improvement planning

<b>How much progress has been made in ensuring that post-inspection action planning and self-assessment lead to consistent and prompt improvements in provision?</b>	<b>Reasonable progress</b>
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The college has continued to improve its system for self-assessment. Course teams now carry out a series of curriculum reviews and evaluations, one of which focuses largely on self-assessment. The course level self-assessment reports are used to produce programme area reports and then departmental reports. Departmental reports now appropriately include reference to employer responsive programmes. The college carries out helpful internal and external peer reviews as well as a series of standardisation meetings, including one by the senior management team. A degree of inconsistency still exists at course level, with some areas concentrating more on description rather than evaluation, but the clear self-assessment process has led to a comprehensive and what appears to be a largely accurate report. Following self-assessment, appropriate quality improvement reports are produced at various levels and these are monitored frequently and jointly by senior managers and heads of department. These reports are helping to drive through improvements, but it is too early to judge the overall impact the changes have had on raising standards.

## Outcomes for learners

**What progress has been made in improving success rates for students, specifically for adults on programmes leading to qualifications, and in implementing strategies to encourage all students to stay in learning and complete their courses?** **Reasonable progress**

The previous inspection judged outcomes for students to be satisfactory, but success rates for adult students were an area of concern. Progress here has been patchy, but overall it is reasonable. At the end of 2008/09, success rates in most aspects had improved well on the previous year with all adult rates rising to satisfactory or good levels. This improvement was not maintained across the board in 2009/10, with the majority of aspects showing some downturn. However, all rates except those for students aged 16 to 18 on level 3 long courses remain at or above the previous year's national averages. Specific problems occurred in 2009/10 with experiments in offering additional qualifications and a switch to some vocational qualifications that did not meet students' needs. Despite this overall decline, achievement of high grades improved, reflecting the emphasis that was being placed on this by teachers and managers. The performance of students, when judged against previous attainment, improved significantly in 2009/10. Progression to other courses or employment also improved in 2009/10. Strategies to encourage students to remain on course are beginning to have an impact, and current retention levels range from satisfactory to good.

**What progress has been made in ensuring that learners on work-based learning programmes finish their qualifications in a timely way?** **Significant progress**

At the time of the previous inspection, work-based learning success rates had been poor for some time and few learners were finishing their courses by their planned end date. Since then the rate for those finishing in a timely way has leapt by 28 percentage points in Train to Gain provision, and by 25 percentage points in apprenticeships. Overall success rates have also improved by six percentage points for apprentices, and 24 percentage points for Train to Gain. The Train to Gain improvement is, to some extent, skewed by the closure of a poorly performing community-based programme that was offering inappropriate information technology vocational qualifications. However, the rates now being achieved for the two programmes are well in excess of relevant national averages. The restructuring of the management of the area, improved staff training, greater focus on planned end dates and increased support for apprentices' literacy and numeracy needs have all contributed to these improvements.

In-year figures suggest that these improvements are being maintained. The college continues to implement improvements and initiatives, such as the early introduction of functional skills for some apprenticeship programmes, and increasing use of observations of teaching, learning and assessment to aid staff development.

## Quality of provision

**What progress has been made in strengthening arrangements to improve further the quality of teaching and learning?**

**Reasonable progress**

A key area for improvement from the previous inspection was to address arrangements to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This has been a particular focus of activity since then, and especially since the arrival of the new Principal. Arrangements have been thoroughly overhauled. Observations of teaching and learning are now carried out by managers and advanced practitioners rather than by a separate department. This is successfully involving managers in the whole process, particularly in the development of staff skills following observations. Staff are now much better involved in offering each other mutual support and sharing good practice. Observations are now unannounced, which is helping to maintain standards. Training of observers has improved, and so has moderation and standardisation of observations. Results of observations are used well to identify trends, or poorly performing areas, and to inform appropriate improvement planning. Other initiatives include more ways to encourage students to perform at high levels. Significant efforts have been put into raising the standards of teaching and learning. The changes made in 2009/10 were not implemented in time to have a noticeable impact on student outcomes, but there are indications that they are beginning to have a positive impact in 2010/11.

**What progress has been made in improving the effectiveness of the monitoring of students' progress and target setting to help students know what they need to do in order to improve?**

**Reasonable progress**

The monitoring of students' progress and setting of helpful targets have improved since the previous inspection. Monitoring of attendance is now good and absences are reported and acted upon quickly. Technical problems have delayed the full introduction of a new electronic individual learning plan. However, a paper-based system remains in place and the electronic individual learning plan allows staff to record both positive and negative comments which provide valuable topics for discussion at tutorials. Students carry out a self-reflection exercise before each termly review, and again this provides a good vehicle for discussion. The targets set are still too variable in quality, with some too vague. Many refer simply to improving attendance or handing in assignments. The tutorial process, including new 'Stretch and Challenge' sessions, is generally good and students value the opportunity to discuss their progress. However, there are currently too many systems for the recording of targets, rather than a single learning plan.

Monitoring of students' progress with regard to their achievement of units towards their qualification is thorough, and a change to the setting of aspirational rather than minimum target grades is showing early signs of success in terms of student outcomes.

## Leadership and management

### **What progress has been made in ensuring consistent implementation and impact of quality assurance procedures?**

### **Significant progress**

Inconsistent implementation of quality assurance procedures was a concern at the previous inspection. Significant progress here has been helped by such things as substantial improvements in the quality, accuracy and availability of performance data. This has helped in the early identification of courses that are underperforming in aspects such as attendance and retention. Course performance is risk assessed and graded. The process is helping drive up standards, as it leads to a monthly report of course performance, and courses that are seriously underperforming are issued with a 'notice to improve'. They are monitored fortnightly by departmental heads, and remain in this category for up to two years until it is clear that improvements in performance have been successfully embedded.

Monitoring of quality assurance procedures, for example actions taken following awarding body reports, is rigorous. In addition, management audits of various aspects of quality assurance have improved, such as the audit of outcomes and documentation from routine course reviews. As a result of this improved monitoring, leaders and managers have a clearer view of the immediate areas for improvement and also the aspects of provision that are performing well, for example the improvement of in-year retention to 94%.

### **What progress has been made in planning to have all areas of the college estate at an appropriate standard?**

### **Significant progress**

The need for improvements to the college estate has been recognised for some time. Shortly before the previous inspection plans for new buildings had to be dropped. Since then the college has greatly improved its planning to make the best of the current estate, following an appropriately detailed review after the new build fell through. Rightly there was an initial emphasis on catching up on delayed maintenance, and significant upgrading of such things as heating and water supplies improved much of the learning environment. Minor priority refurbishments have been carried out to staff and teaching areas. A more substantial phase is now being implemented, including improvements to the learning resource centre, a significant increase in the automotive practical area, and improvements to the fascia and windows of the main block. An innovative project involving the purchase and college refurbishment of a nearby house is providing valuable experience for construction students and offering them an introduction to sustainable energy. Significant sums have been invested in the computing infrastructure; major changes resulted in teething problems in late 2010, but the system is now more stable. All this has been funded from college resources, reflecting the prudent way in which reserves have been built up.

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