

Northampton College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: General Further Education college

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Northampton College is a large general further education college situated in the East Midlands. The college operates from three main sites, one in Northampton town centre, one in Daventry and the main campus at Booth Lane in Northampton. Courses are offered in 14 of the 15 subject areas with no provision in construction and very few learners on land-based courses. Provision is offered from entry to advanced level with the majority of enrolments on advanced-level courses.

The college was last inspected in May 2009 and inspectors judged provision overall to be satisfactory. All main aspects were graded satisfactory, with capacity to improve judged as good. Of the six sector subject areas inspected, health, public services and care was outstanding, hairdressing and beauty therapy was good, engineering, visual and performing arts, literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and independent living and leisure skills were satisfactory. The themes explored during this visit arise from the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college made in developing the use of targets to monitor performance and improve provision? **Reasonable progress**

The use of targets to monitor and inform improvement was underdeveloped at the last inspection. Since then the college has introduced a number of targets that enable many aspects of provision to be monitored more effectively. For example, targets are now set for attendance and retention on each course and because of closer monitoring and earlier intervention, overall retention and attendance rates have improved this year when compared to the same point last year.

The college now uses its self-assessment report more effectively to inform improvement planning. Targets and actions identified within the college's quality improvement plan directly relate to weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. Progress against set targets and actions are closely monitored and improvements in provision are evident. Success rates on many vocational courses have improved since the last inspection and the overall quality of teaching and learning has improved according to the college's own monitoring records. However, improvements are not consistent across the college and in some curriculum areas, especially on academic courses, success rates have not improved. It is difficult to correlate the college's self-assessment grades given the below average success rates in some areas.

Outcomes for learners

How much progress has the college made in raising success rates, especially for learners aged 16 to 18 on advanced level courses and on functional skills courses? **Insufficient progress**

Since the last inspection, success rates for learners' aged 16 to 18 on A- and AS-level courses further declined and in 2009/10 were very significantly below average. While success rates on most vocational courses at advanced level did improve, because of the very low success rates on A- and AS-level courses, the overall success rate at advanced level for learners aged 16 to 18 remained below average. On functional-skills courses, despite modest improvement in 2009/10, and with significantly reduced enrolment numbers, success rates remain well below corresponding national averages at all levels.

In 2009/10, long course success rates declined significantly at foundation level and were well below average but rose significantly at intermediate level to be slightly above average. In subject areas, long course success rates were below average in eight of the 14 areas where the college offers provision. On short courses of between five and 24 weeks duration, success rates declined to well below national levels. The college is aware of the issues that affected success rates and has taken appropriate steps to improve performance. On work-based learning courses, the overall success rate improved in 2009/10 but remained below average.

Quality of provision

What action has the college taken to improve the quality of teaching and learning to increase the proportion of good and better lessons? **Reasonable progress**

Since the last inspection, the college has focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning, with a clear steer from the Principal that good teaching and learning is the minimum standard. The college's lesson observation team has reduced in number to enable more consistent judgements to be made. Information collected through the lesson observation process is collated and used well to target staff development activity. Advanced practitioners provide support and coaching to staff to help improve their practice.

Students interviewed during the monitoring visit were complimentary about the quality of teaching and learning, as were the vast majority of students that returned inspection questionnaires. College data indicate that the overall proportion of lessons judged good or better has improved when compared to the previous year. A higher proportion of lessons were judged to be outstanding this year than was the case last year and the proportion of lessons judged to be inadequate has further reduced. However, analysis of observation records show that the proportion of lessons judged good or better did not improve on advanced-level courses. Success rates and value-added scores at advanced level on A- and AS-level courses remain low.

What progress has the college made in developing the curriculum to enable opportunities for learners to gain information technology qualifications and to provide support for gifted and talented learners?

Reasonable progress

Curriculum provision to enable learners to gain information technology (IT) qualifications and to support gifted and talented learners was underdeveloped at the last inspection. Following a review of the curriculum, all foundation-level students now study for functional skills tests in IT. At intermediate and advanced levels, the college now offers learners the opportunity to study for an IT qualification as one of three functional skills options. The college now provides good access to IT resources and learners on most courses now use IT facilities at some point in their course to enhance their learning experience and to develop their skills.

The college has changed its approach for gifted and talented students since the last inspection and now focuses on providing stretch and challenge within lessons. Plans to evaluate and develop stretch and challenge opportunities and activities are under way. Students of all ability levels are encouraged to take part in national competitions and the college has had some success in the catering, hair and beauty and engineering curriculum areas where students have won competitions. On A- and AS-level courses the impact of stretch and challenge within lessons is less evident as value-added scores on many courses are low.

Leadership and management

How much progress has the college made in developing appraisal and performance management arrangements for staff?

Reasonable progress

Appraisal and performance management arrangements were underdeveloped at the last inspection. Since then the college has introduced an appropriate appraisal system for all staff that has been successfully implemented. Managers and staff have received training and the completion of appraisal documentation is closely monitored. Managers and staff are reviewed against a clear competency framework and are set objectives and targets that are closely linked to college or department strategic plans. However, the targets set for some staff are insufficiently precise and in too many cases do not include targets related to improving the academic performance of courses for which they are responsible. Teaching staff are observed as part of performance management arrangements and the outcomes of lesson observations are taken into account when appraising staff. However, the use of a wider range of performance indicators, such as value-added data or success-rate data, to inform staff performance management remains an area for development. The college uses competency and disciplinary procedures appropriately and staff are more effectively held to account for their performance than was the case at the last inspection.

What actions has the college taken to improve the consistency of curriculum management across the organisation?**Reasonable progress**

The effectiveness of curriculum management varied significantly at the last inspection. Since then, senior managers have restructured the curriculum into seven schools that are more closely aligned to sector subject areas. Within these schools, curriculum managers support heads of school in delivering more measurable targets. Communication has improved since the last inspection and managers value the weekly quality improvement network meetings that enable more effective sharing of information. These meetings provide regular opportunities to discuss cross-college issues and to share good practice with colleagues. Curriculum team meetings, held on the same day, promote more timely and consistent feedback to staff.

The use of management information has improved and monthly data on attendance and retention enable managers to follow up issues with their staff more effectively. Termly curriculum team monitoring meetings, led by the Principal and senior managers, are rigorous in evaluating progress against agreed targets and identifying areas for specific action. Improved curriculum management is contributing to raising learners' success rates. However, the rate of improvement does vary and the impact of curriculum management on raising success rates on A- and AS-level courses within different curriculum areas is limited.

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