

North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of the visit

North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College is a medium-sized general further education college with five campuses serving the communities of Hinckley, Nuneaton and South Leicestershire. It is the product of a merger between North Warwickshire and Hinckley College and South Leicestershire College. The focus of the monitoring visit was to establish the progress governors and leaders have made in improving the quality of provision for learners across all of the college's sites.

Themes

What progress have governors of the merged college made to support and challenge senior leaders to ensure that learners receive high-quality education and training across the various college sites and across the range of the college's provision?

Reasonable progress

Governors and the college principal have managed the college's financial pressures well. They have ensured that leaders and managers continue to focus sharply on, and improve, the quality of the college's provision across all of its sites.

The new chair of governors has been in place since September 2017 and has worked closely with the principal to refresh the board membership and governance processes. Governors have recently refocused their meeting structure from monthly full-governance meetings to a range of committees. These review in more depth areas such as quality and standards, finance, auditing, safeguarding and learners' well-being. These committees now report to the full corporation, providing them with better analysis and scrutiny of college performance.

Governors have ready access to a wide variety of information about learners' progress and achievement, including formal college performance reports and an online data dashboard. This system allows them to scrutinise learners' progress precisely. Governors use this information well to challenge leaders to improve provision. As a result, they are able to 'deep-dive' into areas of concern. For example, they have challenged leaders to make improvements in raising learners' attendance rates and their achievement of functional skills English and mathematics qualifications, and in ensuring that most learners make good progress based on their starting points. Achievement rates in travel and tourism, catering and motor vehicle have improved significantly on the previous academic year.

Governors know where underperforming subjects remain and challenge leaders directly on their actions to improve them. Poorly performing subjects such as health

and social care, sport and access to higher education have individual and specific actions to improve their performance. Based on the college's data at the time of the visit, leaders recognise that there are a few areas that require specific improvement, such as adult learners studying award qualifications and GCSE mathematics high-grade achievement.

Governors acted swiftly following the previous Ofsted support and challenge visit in December 2016 to ensure that they received accurate information about current learners' progress. Senior leaders responded quickly to develop a learner progress monitoring tool to provide this information. Governors now use this system to check the proportion of learners who are on track to meet their target grade. They routinely question leaders to ensure that precise actions are in place to support all learners to achieve their goals. Most learners are now making better progress than in the previous year. However, governors recognise that further improvement action is needed so that all learners achieve their potential.

In addition to monitoring learners' achievement of qualifications, governors scrutinise the impact of quality-assurance systems to improve the standard of teaching, learning and assessment. Governors and senior leaders recognised that the process for observing teaching, learning and assessment did not provide managers with sufficiently useful information to improve teachers' skills. Leaders have revised the system so that teachers receive helpful feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their practice. Managers refer to this feedback during appraisals of teachers' performance and set appropriate actions to help teachers improve their effectiveness. As a result of this support, most teachers have improved their skills. However, managers do not monitor the extent to which learners benefit and make better progress from the teaching they have received. Using the new progress monitoring tool, leaders have revised the process further to measure the impact of teaching on learners' progress over time.

Governors are experts in their fields and use their expertise and influence well to support the college. Governors draw their experience from further and higher education, the local authority, regional support agencies and local employers. Governors share their knowledge with senior leaders and managers to develop the curriculum, for example helping the college to prepare for new T-level qualifications and ensuring that leaders align new provision closely with local economic priorities. As a result of their links with local adult support agencies, governors have helped to develop appropriate courses and support for adult learners. Many of these learners have been unemployed for a significant period of time but move successfully into work. In addition to governors' meetings, governors have established productive links with curriculum managers. They meet learners and see first-hand the implementation and impact of actions to improve the provision. Governors benefit from this experience and gain a deeper understanding of the provision. Consequently, they are more able to question leaders and managers incisively to ensure that progress towards improvement actions is rapid enough.

What progress have senior leaders made in ensuring that the curriculum offer of the merged college tackles skills gaps in the local economy, meets the needs of local employers and enables learners to achieve their career aspirations?

Significant progress

The college offers a diverse range of courses from entry level to level 6. Courses cover all 15 sector subject areas. They match the needs of learners, employers and local communities well. The priorities of the merged college curriculum appropriately reflect the local skills priorities of the Leicester and Leicestershire (LLEP) and Coventry and Warwickshire (CWLEP) Local Enterprise Partnerships, as well as the regional skills priorities of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

Leaders and managers make good use of current labour market information to fully analyse current and future local skills needs. As a result, they have an accurate and well-informed understanding of key economic and skills priorities and labour market gaps. Leaders are re-aligning and extending the college's curriculum appropriately in relation to these challenges.

Following the merger, leaders at the college responded effectively to regional and national education and skills priorities and developed several productive strategic partnerships to address identified regional skills gaps. For example, in September 2018, the college, along with a key regional employer, successfully led a collaborative consortium of higher education institutions. They secured funding to establish an advanced automotive engineering facility to develop the skills necessary for connected and autonomous vehicles. The college is also the lead partner in a collaborative bid to establish an institute of technology specialising in higher-level skills in logistics and transport. In addition, the college, along with two other regional colleges, has developed a coordinated approach to address digital skills shortages in cybersecurity, networking and 'big-data' analytics.

Leaders and managers at the college use employers' and external stakeholders' views and opinions effectively to shape and influence the curriculum. For example, in travel and tourism, managers are working with an airport service provider to develop an aviation qualification. In computing, managers have adapted level 3 and higher education information technology programmes for a major retailer. Managers ensure that the apprenticeship curriculum reflects local employer-led priorities, including standards-based apprenticeships and an increased focus on advanced-level apprenticeships.

The principal and senior leaders have a strong presence at a range of strategic economic development and national policy-making bodies, providing them with a deep understanding of emerging skills priorities. They use this information incisively to reshape the college's curriculum. For example, the principal until recently was a non-executive board member at the Department for Education, formerly chaired the LLEP People Board and is a board member of the CWLEP. She also chairs the CWLEP

Skills and Productivity Group and is deputy chair of WorldSkills UK. Other senior leaders regularly attend key regional meetings involving the WMCA and the further education and skills productivity group responsible for the planned introduction of T levels and regionalised funding for adult skills.

Since the college merger, leaders have successfully harmonised the curriculum provision and the delivery of careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) support across all college sites. Managers ensure that learners routinely benefit from impartial careers and course information so that they choose the right programme to help them realise their future careers and aspirations. In June 2018, the college's merged careers advice and guidance team was re-accredited to the Matrix Standard.

The college's CEIAG advisers are appropriately qualified and experienced and help learners explore, evaluate and align their current strengths and ambitions with possible career options. Learners value the CEIAG support that they receive. Based on in-year college data, a high proportion of learners progress to a range of positive destinations, such as employment and further and higher education. Similarly, a high and increasing proportion of learners who were care leavers advance to other employment, education and training goals.

Leaders provide effective information, advice and guidance for young people before they join and during their time at college. They offer guidance through a range of activities, including large-scale events and school-based activities. For example, leaders work in partnership with national and regional organisations such as Aim Higher, STEM Learning, Big Bang and Engineering UK, WorldSkills UK LIVE and National Apprenticeship Weeks. They confidently direct and signpost learners to a range of useful information, advice and resources that encourage them to think of all possible options for obtaining work or training.

The accommodation used to provide specialist advice and guidance at the college's principal campuses in Hinckley, South Wigston and Nuneaton is welcoming and professional. Specialist facilities offer learners convenient access to specialist staff, a range of appropriate guidance, help and support and next step materials. They also provide a suitable opportunity for learners to access confidential advice sessions held in office-type accommodation to support discussions of a personal or private nature. Learners accessing training delivered at the college's Harrowbrook Training Centre have access to a specialist information, advice and guidance adviser who attends the site one day a week.

However, at the time of the monitoring visit, none of the CEIAG advisers had specific sectoral responsibilities or expertise aligned to the college's curriculum priorities. In addition, college leaders and managers do not know the destinations of adult learners on Jobcentre Plus programmes or of those who attend courses of fewer than 150 hours.

What progress have leaders and managers made in improving the teaching of English and mathematics across all curriculum areas and levels of study so that learners can make progress according to their potential? Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have high expectations and place a high priority on the development and improvement of learners' English and mathematics skills. Leaders have introduced additional time each week for teachers to review learners' progress and set targets to improve these skills. The most recent achievement information shows that most learners and apprentices develop the appropriate English and mathematics skills. As a result, learners' achievement of functional skills qualifications in these subjects is high. Teachers have also ensured that significantly more learners studying GCSE English achieve high grades.

Teachers use a range of interesting and imaginative activities to challenge learners to develop their English and mathematics skills. They ask learners questions and set relevant activities using examples from real life. For example, a public services group was asked to write a long paragraph about working in a court. Learners enjoyed debating the experience and used the correct terminology.

Teachers prepare learners well for future examinations by helping them to learn useful strategies and techniques. They ensure that learners master and memorise essential technical terms and develop good organisational and summation skills. For example, business learners at level 3 analysed past examination papers for spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors to support their understanding of what is required to achieve the highest grades.

Most teachers now develop learners' English and mathematics skills effectively when teaching their vocational subject. Teachers now make better use of an assessment of learners' initial English and mathematics skills when planning and providing learning activities. This helps learners to produce work to the required standard and to develop the specific skills that they need to pass their qualifications. However, in a few lessons, teachers do not help learners develop these skills to improve their readiness for employment, for example by not relating a session on fractions to real-life activities such as cooking and weighing.

Learners frequently benefit from and use high-quality English and mathematics resources to support their independent learning and group work. Teachers ensure that handouts and tasks are clear but appropriately complex to challenge the most able learners. Staff in one resource centre extend learners' English and mathematics skills outside of the classroom and hold a weekly competition on these subjects, which is popular with learners. Teachers find the professional development they receive to improve their skills to teach English and mathematics helpful. They have also received specific training to use the college's 'on track' learner monitoring system.

This has improved teachers' knowledge of learners' progress and has contributed significantly to the improvement of learners' progress in English and mathematics.

Achievement of high grades in GCSE mathematics has declined and is below the low national rate. Teachers do not always engage learners who have previously failed examinations in this subject or whose attendance is poor. Managers are addressing learners' attendance at English and mathematics lessons. This has improved on previous years but remains below the college attendance rate.

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