

Cambridge Regional College

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Cambridge Regional College (CRC) and Huntingdon Regional College (HRC) merged on 1 August 2017. The newly formed college retained the Cambridge Regional College name. The college is a medium-sized, general further education college primarily serving the Cambridge sub-region. It operates from two campuses. The largest is in Kings Hedges, adjacent to the Cambridge Science Park on the northern outskirts of Cambridge. The second campus is in the centre of Huntingdon.

In the most recent Ofsted inspections before merger, CRC had been rated as 'good', while HRC was judged to be 'inadequate'.

This monitoring visit took place to review and evaluate the progress that governors, leaders and staff have made to establish the strategic priorities of the new CRC, and to action weaknesses in the quality of provision in the predecessor colleges.

At the time of the monitoring visit, around 7,500 learners study across the college, with roughly a quarter at the Huntingdon campus and around three quarters at the Cambridge campus.

Themes

What progress have leaders, managers and governors made in bringing together the two colleges, establishing a shared vision, mission and values, identifying strategic priorities and creating an effective management structure for the group?

Significant progress

Senior leaders, governors and managers have rapidly and successfully established and embedded a shared culture and new values across both colleges. Staff, learners and governors very quickly developed the '#WeAreCRC' brand to create one identity post-merger. As a result, learners, staff and governors have fully embraced the merged college as one organisation.

Senior leaders have quickly developed a clear purpose and direction for the college. Consequently, there has been a rapid improvement in the college's reputation with key stakeholders and the local community. Working closely with local employers, leaders and managers have enhanced and increased opportunities for learners at both campuses. For example, managers are working closely with the local construction board to identify and develop a wide range of apprenticeships and work experience for learners.

Governors and senior leaders from CRC worked closely and effectively with leaders and staff at HRC before the formal merger. This enabled them to develop and

implement positive changes rapidly once merged. Leaders worked closely with managers and staff from both campuses to identify the strengths of each college. They used this information to develop an effective management structure and to rapidly embed the shared ethos and culture of the merged college. The result has enabled managers to improve the quality of provision by sharing existing good practice, management systems and management expectations quickly with their teams across both campuses. Staff at all levels are clear about their responsibilities.

Leaders and managers have effectively harmonised key management systems. They have implemented the best from each campus and further enhanced them. As a result, staff have good access to information that they need to be effective. For example, all managers and teachers now have accurate and relevant data for the whole college. This has helped them to accurately identify strengths and weaknesses and plan for improvement.

Senior leaders and governors have significantly improved staff morale since the merger. They have developed new cross-college roles and promoted staff internally to key posts. Leaders have ensured that staff across the college have equal pay and working conditions. Because of leaders' actions in listening and acting upon ideas and feedback, staff feel valued and reassured that the 'one college' approach is a reality.

What progress have senior leaders and governors made in establishing an effective governance structure that has a suitable breadth of expertise, can oversee strategic decision-making and quality of provision, and serves the needs of the group? Reasonable progress

Senior leaders and governors took decisive and swift action to strengthen arrangements for governance post-merger. Leaders have carefully selected governors from both colleges as well as engaging new governors to fill skills gaps.

Governors have developed effective links with curriculum and service areas to help them to better understand the functions of the college. As a result, they are more able to engage with staff and learners. This enables them to evaluate the impact of leadership and management strategies on the quality of provision first-hand. Staff and managers appreciate the interest and time governors take to communicate with them.

Managers and learners benefit from the experience and contacts governors have within the wider community. Governors have used their strong contacts with key stakeholders such as local universities to support curriculum development. For example in supporting the development of forensic science programmes.

Governors have quickly identified and understood the priorities of the merged college to ensure improvements take place. As a result, they have strengthened their scrutiny of key areas of the college. This has enabled them to review the impact of improvement strategies adopted by managers in more depth. However, the impact of this change on improving quality needs more time to become fully evident.

Governors set senior leaders and managers appropriate targets to improve provision. Managers disseminate and share these effectively with all staff within the organisation. However, the targets set are not always challenging enough to ensure that rapid enough progress is made. For example, the current attendance target is too low, teachers acceptance of why students cannot attend is too generous and not enough learners are achieving their qualifications.

What progress have senior leaders made in ensuring that the curriculum the group provides for the communities in which the campuses are located tackles skills gaps in the local economy, meets the needs of local employers and enables learners to achieve their career aspirations?

Significant progress

Governors and senior leaders have an extremely clear strategic focus to ensure that each campus provides for the needs and priorities of its local area. Leaders and managers have developed highly effective partnerships and links with a broad range of organisations close to each campus. These include local authorities, chambers of commerce, economic development offices and local employers. As a result, leaders and managers have made sure that the curriculum serves the needs of their communities.

Senior leaders have developed an effective strategy to raise the aspirations of learners at the Huntingdon campus. This includes introducing level 3 courses and keeping uneconomic courses running to ensure that learners have a good choice of subjects at the campus. In addition, leaders and governors have prioritised investment to improve facilities and opportunities. For example, learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) benefit from a new horticulture shop and kitchen. The development of a forklift-truck driving centre usefully meets the needs of local businesses.

The highly effective relationships that leaders and managers have with local stakeholders have led to a rapid improvement in the reputation of the Huntingdon campus. Local schools now recommend CRC Huntingdon as a positive destination for their pupils. This has led to a significant increase in applications for 2019/20.

Teachers and managers ensure that learners gain useful and meaningful work placements through effective planning with local employers. Managers track learners' progress closely. They support those at risk of falling behind to enable them to catch up quickly. Managers use links with the University of Cambridge particularly well to enable learners with SEND to go on to paid employment and gain good-quality work-related skills. Learners benefit from working in the university's community café and undertaking garden maintenance duties at university sites.

Managers use strong partnerships with employers and other providers to link curriculum teams from across the region. The impact is that the college can develop and offer very specialised courses that are delivered with other local providers. For example, the iMet centre runs in conjunction with CRC and Peterborough Regional

College, providing apprenticeships in construction and composites. This initiative has increased apprenticeships and meets the needs of local engineering companies, helping to reduce skills gaps locally.

What progress have leaders and managers made in evaluating the quality of provision, starting to address key weaknesses in predecessor colleges and drawing up sound quality improvement processes? Reasonable progress

Since the merger, senior leaders and managers have quickly identified and implemented the quality improvement processes that previously had the most positive impact on raising standards. Managers have implemented these processes across the college to good effect. For example, staff at Huntingdon have adopted the procedures used at Cambridge to track learners' destinations on completion of their studies. This has led to much improved identification of where learners from across the college go on to when they leave.

Senior leaders have improved ways that enable staff to share good practice and knowledge more frequently. For example, managers identify teachers who use creative activities to engage learners and those who are the best teachers. Managers ensure these staff train colleagues to improve teaching and learning across the department.

Managers have successfully motivated teachers to take greater personal responsibility for their courses and learners' outcomes. All teachers now have full access to management data. They use it effectively to identify strengths and areas for improvement within their courses. Managers encourage teachers to find solutions to issues that arise, and as a result, teachers feel more valued by managers.

Senior leaders and managers have strengthened processes to monitor the impact of actions taken to improve provision. Managers have introduced more frequent meetings to scrutinise curriculum data and learners' performance. This enables them to identify when learners are at risk of falling behind and to take appropriate actions to help raise standards. The impact of this improved focus by managers is leading to an upward trend in performance.

Leaders and managers have an appropriate process to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning. Managers use formal observations and more frequent but shorter visits to classrooms to identify what works effectively and what requires improvement. Because of these findings, teachers are supported appropriately through, for example, face-to-face meetings or sessions with an expert colleague. However, managers are not always clear about the main weaknesses in teaching and learning across the college. Therefore, they are unable to plan college-wide professional development events that focus sufficiently on improving weaknesses.

Managers use self-assessment reports and quality improvement plans effectively to identify accurately strengths and areas for improvement. The resulting plans have had a positive impact on raising standards. However, managers do not always state

clearly enough what specific actions are needed to enable further or more rapid improvement to take place. They do not always identify clear or aspirational targets. The result is, that although the quality of provision is improving, progress in the first year following merger was too slow.

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