

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Queen Alexandra College

Date of visit: 5 June 2008

Context

Queen Alexandra College is an independent specialist residential college based in the suburbs of Birmingham. The college provides education and training for learners with visual impairments and/or a range of other disabilities, in particular those with autistic spectrum disorders. There are both residential and day learners. They attend from across the country, although day learners are local to the area. Learners are funded by the Learning and Skills Council, the Residential Training Unit of the Department for Work and Pensions, and Job Centre Plus. There are 124 learners of whom 77 are residential and 47 are day. Of these, there are 73 male learners and 51 female. Approximately 50% have a visual impairment and 18 are from a minority ethnic background.

The college offers a range of vocational courses from pre-entry to Level 4. The provision for RTU learners is geared to individual preparation for employment. The college has residential accommodation staffed according to the varied needs of learners. There are hostels on site and housing accommodation provided within the community.

At the previous inspection, in November 2007, the college's overall effectiveness was judged satisfactory. Achievement and standards were judged to be good and the quality of provision and leadership and management were judged satisfactory, as was the college's capacity to improve. Equality of opportunity was judged to be good. Of three sector subject areas inspected, two were judged satisfactory and one judged as good.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made to improve the wording and accessibility of targets for learners?	Reasonable progress
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The college has undertaken external training and internal workshop activities to address the issue of improving wording and accessibility of targets. The

development of core targets and objectives has provided a clear focus for tutors and learners in lessons. The wording of earlier versions of some objectives was insufficiently specific. Later versions use different and more specific verbs such as state, point and locate to successfully improve accessibility and measurability. However, a few objectives remain insufficiently specific. The phased introduction of an electronic database has promoted a clearer structure of long and medium term goals, targets and objectives. This process is in the early stages of embedding. Learner involvement in the process of developing targets and objectives is under-developed.

How much progress has been made in embedding the personal tutor role in reviewing tutees' progress every term? How does this affect learners' progress in personal development?	Significant progress
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The personal tutor role has become an established and effective role in reviewing the progress of learners and their achievement of core targets and objectives which focus on personal development. The college has increased the time allocation to facilitate this role and the introduction of an electronic database has allowed prompt monitoring of the recording of learner progress by personal tutors. Core targets and objectives are effectively reviewed and revised in weekly personal tutorials as necessary. Most personal development targets have been reworded to encourage learners to take positive action rather than the previous expectation of not doing unacceptable actions. The electronic database is fully embedded in most departments.

Quality of provision

How successfully has the recently established Quality Improvement Group (QIG) developed the consistency of recording and the monitoring of progress in different parts of the college? Are other actions having an impact on this area for improvement?	Reasonable progress
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Since the inspection, the college has made a number of structural and managerial changes which have started to have a noticeable impact on the teaching and learning activities throughout the college. Among the changes is the establishment of a new group of senior managers to drive forward the changes outlined in the quality improvement plan and the detailed and thorough post inspection action plan.

Standardised schemes of work have been introduced providing a clear outline of the structure of courses. The recently introduced electronic database is recognised by staff as an effective vehicle for tracking the progress of the learners across most parts of the college, with particular reference to cross-curricular achievement of core targets and objectives. Residential team leaders are now allocated time to conduct constructive discussions and record these with their various counterparts in the academic part of the college.

The system for recording observations of teaching and learning across the college has been simplified and is more manageable for the observers. More effective observation reports indicate an increasing emphasis on learning in lessons, whilst less effective reports are focused too much on the teaching techniques and strategies. Observations of teaching and learning are not conducted in the residential hostels.

The college has provided training for lesson planning recently. What impact has this and other actions had on the quality of lesson planning to meet individual needs?	Significant progress
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The college's development work has led to four different formats for lesson plans reflecting appropriately the range of learners and provision. In all cases, the outline provides an effective set of prompts for tutors to address learning, teaching and other factors, such as Every Child Matters themes. The changed formats for lesson plans focus the tutor on the individual requirements of the learners more clearly than before. Each lesson plan includes clear guidance on the support and behavioural requirements of each learner. The lesson plans provide a clear link to the curriculum and are more accessible to learning support assistants and to the learners. However, there are some inconsistencies in completion of the different lesson plans.

Leadership and management

What impact have the actions taken since the inspection had on the coherence, rigour and standardisation of quality improvement processes?	Significant progress
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The appointment of a quality assurance manager, curriculum area managers and programme leaders has provided additional resources to support the management of quality improvement processes. The college's recently-developed QIG provides an effective vehicle for driving forward the changes planned. The QIG has introduced standardized agendas for its own and

curriculum team meetings with clear opportunities for widespread involvement of staff in reviewing and evaluating the developments as well as reviewing learners' progress. The observation of teaching and learning scheme has been changed to provide a culture of continual improvement across the college with regular monitoring and effective follow-up. Clear action plans are developed and reviewed at a suitable interval.

The college is an active partner in the area peer review group and benefits from the opportunity to improve practice through benchmarking with other independent specialist colleges and to evaluate its own practice. Performance indicators provide clear whole college targets and a comprehensive quality improvement cycle acts as an effective guide for quality improvement actions. The college recognizes that while lecturers and learners feel more involved in the development of the college, the support staff are not so well involved. It plans to address this concern.