

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Thames Valley University

Date of visit: 17 June 2009

Context

Thames Valley University (TVU) is an educational provider of both higher education and further education (FE). In 2004, it merged with Reading College and School of Arts and Design. Of approximately 8,000 students on FE programmes enrolled at the university in 2008/09, some 60% are studying on a part-time basis. Around one third of the students are under the age of 19. Nearly a third of the students aged 16 to 18 and around half the adults are from minority ethnic groups.

In the 2008 inspection, the overall effectiveness of the university's FE provision was judged to be inadequate. This reflects inadequate grades for both achievement and standards and leadership and management. Quality of provision and equality of opportunity were judged to be satisfactory, as was capacity to improve. Of the eight curriculum areas inspected, five were satisfactory, two were inadequate and one was good.

As this visit is within the same academic year as the inspection, it is not possible to make further judgements on achievements and standards, as very little additional evidence is available in terms of course completion and/or examination success.

Quality of provision

To what extent are lesson observations providing a realistic assessment of the quality of teaching and learning and a clear agenda for improvement?	Insufficient progress
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The university has made strenuous efforts to improve teaching and learning, with an intense focus on lesson observations over the last six months. However, the impact of these observations and the associated development activities is not yet secure or consistent across all sector subject areas.

Expectations of what is acceptable have risen in that observations are repeated when a lesson is judged to be either satisfactory or inadequate. TVU's own analysis indicates that, of some 300 lesson observations by an internal team of observers, around 68% of teaching is good or better, 28% is satisfactory and 4% is inadequate. No analysis has yet been undertaken by the university to ascertain whether or not this reflects any trends in relation to levels, curriculum areas, age group or campus.

Staff training events have had a focus on promoting active learning and there is some evidence to suggest that teachers have used ideas from these sessions in their

own teaching. Support is becoming more tailored to teachers' needs, with the development of individual action plans, following an observation.

Students interviewed on this visit confirm that the quality of teaching is variable. They describe some as good or very good but also talk about those teachers who talk for the whole lesson and do not check whether or not students have understood what has been covered.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made in improving the quality of provision in the sixth form academy?	Reasonable progress
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Reasonable progress has been made in improving the quality of provision in the university's sixth form academy. At the previous inspection, it was reported that "the effectiveness of efforts to tackle weaker performance has been slow, and in some cases negligible". In 2007/08 success rates for students aged 16 to 18 on level 3 courses, including A/AS levels, were significantly below the national average, and the proportion of students achieving grades A* to C in their GCSE examinations was too low. Additionally, success rates on many vocational qualifications at level 3 were low. For example, most students on the full-time course in childcare had failed to gain the qualification for the last three years.

Leaders and managers have worked hard over the last six months to improve provision, and evidence exists of an impact in some aspects of their work. Data produced during the visit indicate that retention rates have improved and that success rates, and the proportion of high grades achieved by students, should improve in the current academic year. However, this improvement is unlikely to be consistent across all aspects of the academy's provision. Leaders at the academy have been successful in taking actions that are designed to raise both expectations and performance, although they have been less adept at prioritising these actions or at measuring the impact of some of the actions taken. For example, techniques to gather students' views on the quality of provision have not revealed some concerns held by students.

Efforts to tackle weaker performance have been both swifter and more determined than previously, and the use of data to analyse progress has improved. However, some of the short-term targets set, for example, for A-level provision, are unrealistic. A number of courses have been removed from the curriculum, primarily because of their poor quality, but also for financial reasons. These courses include the full-time childcare courses where managers found the problems to be intractable. Leaders recognise the risks to recruitment posed by a narrowing of the curriculum offer, for example, the significant reduction in the number of A/AS courses available. Managers also recognise that students' experience on a minority of courses is still unsatisfactory.

Links between the academy and other FE departments have improved as a result of restructuring throughout the university. However, there is considerable scope to strengthen links and share good practice further between teachers working on

courses in the same sector subject area but within different departments of the FE provision.

How effective have managers and teachers been in improving the inadequate provision in business and in visual arts?	Reasonable progress
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Reasonable progress has been made in improving provision in business and visual arts, both of which were judged to be inadequate at the previous inspection. In both areas, the curriculum offer has been reviewed and, as a consequence, several courses will no longer be offered. As noted above, decisions have been made on the basis of financial viability, quality of provision and the extent to which the provision meets students' needs.

To raise standards, much emphasis has been placed on ensuring that students' progress is monitored every six weeks. This has enabled managers to more easily identify and monitor predicted achievement and to make appropriate arrangements for students who need additional academic support. Staff acknowledge that this system, while helpful, would benefit from greater rigour. Many of the students interviewed were not aware of their predicted grades or what they need to do to ensure that they make sufficient progress.

Managers report that the quality of teaching in these two areas has improved, as a result of staff changes, the observation system and staff development sessions. They recognise that there are pockets of weaker teaching and this was confirmed by students.

Evidence shows that retention rates are higher in this current academic year than they were in the previous year. Within the new management structure, those responsible for visual arts and business are more aware of the need to analyse available data to identify trends and to challenge under-performance.

To what extent have changes to the academic structure sharpened the lines of responsibility and accountability associated with the FE provision?	Reasonable progress
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The university has made reasonable progress in re-structuring management arrangements to improve the lines of responsibility and accountability for the FE provision. At the previous inspection it was reported that "complex line management arrangements across the institution have exacerbated the slow response to areas of weak performance". Plans were already in place at the time of the previous inspection to tackle this weakness, and these have been accelerated. FE departments have been separated from the university faculties to provide direct lines of accountability within the Reading campus for FE provision. As a consequence, management arrangements are now more in line with those seen in a general FE college, and this has improved accountability structures. A sensible re-alignment of corporate functions has ensured that, where appropriate, dedicated support services are provided for the FE provision. For example, a human resources adviser is now

attached to the FE provision to improve performance management of staff, and the data needs of the Reading campus are met by a specialist team.

Since the merger of TVU and Reading College of Art and Design in 2004, the budgets for HE and FE have been amalgamated. Progress has recently been made in splitting these budgets, and from 2009/10 FE curriculum managers will hold their own budgets based on income from funding bodies and other sources. University leaders recognise that as a consequence of this, the FE provision will have to make significant savings, particularly in relation to staff costs.

Governance arrangements for the FE provision have been strengthened, with an FE Committee operating as a full subcommittee of the university's Board of Governors. Appropriate expertise has been drafted in to the FE Committee.

An external options appraisal has been carried out to present the university with a range of possibilities for the future of the FE provision. These options are due to be presented to university governors in July 2009. A rapid decision is then expected as to the future direction of the FE provision. University leaders recognise that any option chosen will include the need for the FE provision to be run relatively autonomously in Reading.