

City College Norwich

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

City College Norwich is a large college of further and higher education based close to the city centre. Its catchment area includes the city and surrounding county of Norfolk. The region is one of comparative affluence although there are pockets of significant disadvantage. Norwich is the second most deprived district in the eastern region. The proportion of pupils who achieve five GCSE grades at A* to C is below the national average.

The majority of students are aged 16 to 18. The college provides courses in 14 of the 15 sector subject areas and a range of work-based learning and Entry to Employment programmes. It is the lead provider in a large Train to Gain consortium. The college works with more than 30 schools to provide courses for students aged 14 to 16.

At the previous inspection the college was graded satisfactory for effectiveness of provision, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management. Of the six graded subject areas, three were judged to be good, two satisfactory and one, science and mathematics, inadequate. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, including progress in improving the quality of provision in science and mathematics.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has the college made in improving the rigour and accuracy of its self-assessment? Reasonable progress

The previous inspection identified insufficiently rigorous self-assessment processes. For its current self-assessment the college has ensured that from the beginning staff focus carefully on using data on outcomes for students to form evaluative judgements. Staff leading on self-assessment, both for subject areas and cross college aspects, evaluate provision against the new common inspection framework. Although it is too early to judge the effectiveness of this, as the report is not yet complete for 2008/09, preparation for writing the report shows thorough processes based on detailed evaluation of outcomes for learners, safeguarding, and equality and diversity.

Clear communication lines between staff at all levels are used well to ensure that self-assessment is well evidenced and evaluative. Managers present their evidence and judgements to a panel of senior managers and external partners who challenge them to ensure the judgements are based firmly on facts. The process is inclusive of the views of students, staff, employers and governors.

What progress has the college made in improving the consistency of the quality of provision across all subject areas? Reasonable progress

A vice principal for curriculum and quality has been appointed since the previous inspection to improve the consistency of quality arrangements across curriculum areas. The curriculum areas are now audited, and retention, attendance, key skills and other data relevant to developing consistency are monitored regularly. The initial teacher training team and the lesson observation team have been brought together to share good practice and to ensure that they are expecting similar standards of classroom practice through lesson observations that focus on students' learning and progress. Appraisal is now informed by lesson observation outcomes and a new continuing professional development (CPD) centre offers individual support to teachers based on their identified needs. A detailed and regularly updated quality improvement database enables managers to monitor improvements regularly. Weekly meetings of the quality improvement team ensure that actions and improvements are well communicated across the college through several methods, including project groups and frequent focused staff development activities.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving outcomes, especially for students aged 16 to 18 on advanced level courses? Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection the college has improved retention and success rates for long courses, which are now around national averages. In particular, the success rates for students aged 16 to 18 on AS levels and for adults on long level 2 programmes have risen by eight percentage points to around national averages.

A new and thorough initial assessment at interview enables students to enter appropriate levels of study, and their learning needs are better understood by tutors. Managers have introduced several changes to the curriculum. Some poorly performing programmes have been closed, or modified. Other programmes have been restructured so that students are assessed each semester rather than at the end of the year. Many two year vocational programmes are now designed so that students who finish after one year can achieve certification.

An important factor in improving outcomes is the 'Promoting Achievement in Learning' team (PAL) who contact students immediately they are absent, offering help to keep them on programmes. Data show that retention has increased significantly since PAL interventions. Further support is offered through increased contact with parents. Students in some subject areas where staff now have high expectations of them and challenge them appropriately, for example, in performing arts and media studies, achieve a proportion of high grade passes significantly above

national averages. Students are encouraged to learn from each other and take responsibility for their own learning. All these changes are underpinned by active support from managers for innovations focused on students' learning.

What progress has been made in improving key skills provision? Significant progress

Key skills and functional skills are now a management priority and the college has invested much management support to improve the provision. Outcomes have improved significantly, with success rates rising from 40% to 57%. Each school completes regular reports on the progress students make. Initial assessment enables effective diagnosis of students' support needs. Students are encouraged to use the on-line assessment results to set their own targets for improvement.

Since the previous inspection the sharing of good practice between work-based programmes, where key skills achievement is high, and full-time programmes has increased. Key and functional skills are now more consistently delivered through a subject relevant context. Staff are now being trained to assess work in a way which offers greater evidence for key skills achievement, including marking for accuracy. College data show that students who take key skills achieved an 85% success rate on their main programmes, eleven percentage points higher than those who did not take key skills. Retention rates for those taking key skills were eight percentage points higher than those who did not.

What progress has been made in ensuring students are given challenging targets? Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection, teachers have been trained in target setting and personalised learning. An interactive, on-line individual learning plan is now offered to all students. This enables easy access so that students, their tutors and their teachers can update targets regularly. Students are introduced to target setting at induction, and given further support on setting specific and measurable targets during tutorial sessions. Increasingly, students are encouraged to set clear and stretching targets for themselves in lessons. Course tutors and managers monitor the quality of targets to ensure they are challenging, for example, by developing students' aspirations to gain higher grades. If targets are not challenging, teachers are offered further development. Whilst some students have targets focused only on task completion, an increasing number of challenging targets are set. The electronic individual learning plans show that many students raise their aspirations over time as they increase their knowledge and understanding. Staff share good practice in target setting regularly, through the personalised learning forum, weekly curriculum meetings and membership of cross-college project groups.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in improving the internal lesson observation scheme to ensure that teaching strategies meet the needs of all students, in particular those in science and mathematics? Reasonable progress

Managers have introduced a new lesson observation process which increases the focus on learning. Teachers whose lessons are graded satisfactory or inadequate in observations have received one-to-one support and all have improved their grades when re-observed. Managers have appointed relevant staff to the new CPD unit. They are aware of the need to moderate judgements to ensure standardisation. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the strategies to increase learning through the improved internal lesson observation process. Teaching and learning in most of the lessons observed are good. Teachers involve learners in a wide range of activities, but they do not challenge learners of different abilities to attain higher standards sufficiently.

Science and mathematics

Outcomes for learners

How much have the success rates in AS science and mathematics improved and how do they compare with national averages? Reasonable progress

The success rates in AS science and mathematics subjects increased considerably between 2007/08 and 2008/09. Those for biology and chemistry are well above the national averages, but those for mathematics and further mathematics are well below the national averages. Most retention rates are satisfactory, except for AS mathematics and further mathematics where they are very low. Pass rates are very high in AS biology and further mathematics, but are very low in AS mathematics.

How effective have strategies been to make sure that students in AS chemistry and mathematics make better progress? Reasonable progress

Students in AS chemistry and mathematics made poor progress in 2007/08 compared with their prior attainment, with many failing to achieve a pass grade. A-level chemistry and physics students, however, progressed very well compared with their attainment on entry. In 2008/09, 70% of AS biology students attained at or above their initial targets based on their entry qualifications. Nearly half of the AS chemistry, physics, mathematics and psychology students, however, did not achieve their minimum target grades. Nevertheless, the proportions of AS chemistry and mathematics students who achieved or exceeded their target grades in 2008/09 were higher than those in 2007/08. Staff use course progress reviews effectively to monitor students' progress compared with their minimum target grades. The

proportions of students gaining high grades in AS chemistry, mathematics, further mathematics and psychology are low or very low.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving the use of information and learning technology (ILT) in science and mathematics teaching? Reasonable progress

Staff have had the opportunity to receive much staff development to improve their use of ILT to aid learning. Teachers have completed assessments to determine their level of competence in a range of e-learning and teaching skills. Most have improved their ratings after development. It is too early to judge the full impact of the staff development strategies. Teachers made satisfactory use of ILT in the lessons observed during this visit. Students state that teachers use ILT, including interactive software, better in 2009/10 than in 2008/09, and that it aids their learning. Although the new learning and teaching observation report contains criteria related to the planning of learning activities including the appropriate use of ILT, it does not cover explicitly the effective use of ILT to aid learning.

Leadership and management

How effective are strategies to increase students' attendance at lessons in science and mathematics? Significant progress

Students' attendance in 2009/10, compared with the same period in 2008/09, has risen in each AS and A-level subject, except for AS biology and A-level physics. Attendance in most subjects is high. Staff monitor students' absences closely and managers have increased resources in order to extend the successful PAL scheme to A-level students in 2009/10.

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