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Ynysfach
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Dear Mr O'Shea

Estyn review of Performance on Merthyr Tydfil College

Following the Annual Review of Performance visit to your institution on the 23 and 24 June 2014, this letter forms an annual report based on the outcomes of that visit. The letter is published on the Estyn website.

Bernard Hayward HMI and Gill Sims HMI evaluated the current performance of the institution and reviewed the progress made against the recommendations arising from earlier inspections. They met with senior and middle managers and a small group of lecturers. They scrutinised documentation, including evidence on the progress made against each of the previous inspection recommendations. They also considered the quality of the provision in the learning area of construction.

At the end of the monitoring visit, the inspectors reported their findings to the principal and deputy principal.

The college merged with the University of Glamorgan in 2006 and from 2007 has been a company limited by guarantee. It is now a subsidiary company of the University of South Wales. The college was last inspected in 2010.

Outcome of the link inspector visit

Since the inspection of Merthyr Tydfil College in March 2010 the college has made good progress in addressing the recommendations left by the inspection team.

1 Outcomes and standards

Almost three-quarters of the learners attending the college are from areas with high levels of deprivation. Many of these learners have poor basic skills on entry. The college has a policy of inclusivity and encourages learners to progress to higher level

courses and provides learners on A level and other Level 3 courses with additional support to help them succeed. All course data indicates there has been an improvement in learner success over recent years of three percentage points. The college remains close to the average for all colleges in Wales. About one in five learners attend courses in high-performing learning areas, but a similar proportion attends courses in learning areas that are underperforming.

2 Essential skills

The college works well to develop strategies for teaching literacy and numeracy that encourage learners to improve their skills. Senior staff review the effectiveness of these strategies on a regular basis and make appropriate changes and improvements. The college literacy toolkit is used appropriately in many learning areas and the college has recently introduced a numeracy toolkit for staff reference. Teachers have good opportunities to attend training courses, delivered by qualified specialists, to improve their skills in teaching literacy and numeracy and meeting learners' individual needs.

All learners have an initial assessment prior to, or during the enrolment period. They also receive a diagnostic assessment if appropriate. These allow tutors to set appropriate literacy and numeracy targets and to identify those learners who may require additional support. The college offers a useful range of support options including small group sessions, whole-class lessons and workshops.

The college has established a marking policy for literacy to enable tutors and learners to share how to approach common errors of spelling, grammar and punctuation. However, this is not used consistently enough across classes and learning areas.

3 Teaching and assessment

The college employs a range of effective strategies to improve learning, teaching and assessment. As a priority, the college is investing resources in continuous professional development (CPD) to enable teaching and support staff to improve their skills in the delivery of literacy and numeracy for learners at all levels.

As part of the literacy and numeracy strategy, the college has set targets for teaching and support staff to attain further relevant qualifications, depending on their specific roles. These include Essential Skills Practitioners (Level 3) and Level 2 qualifications for classroom support staff. Teachers in both academic and vocational areas undertake training using the Literacy and Numeracy Toolkits. The co-ordinator monitors these activities to measure the impact on learners' progress, teachers' marking schemes and assessments, ESW improvement and ILPs, and embedding skills in schemes of work and learning plans.

The peer observation of lessons informs the content of the programme of CPD and quality assurance processes. New teachers are well supported and good practice is identified and shared throughout the college.

4 Curriculum

As a result of becoming a tertiary institution for the local authority secondary schools, there has been an increasing demand for AS and A2 courses. In the first year, delivery focused on AS provision. The college has established appropriate provision to accommodate the new learners and provided new facilities for them in the new college. However, a significant minority of learners changed their programme choice from AS to BTEC during the initial year. The college has improved arrangements with local schools to ensure that programme selection by the next cohort of learners is based on better information before they transfer from school.

The college uses a range of intelligence, including labour market information, to plan and deliver the programmes that meet demand. It has developed good links with local employers and responds well to local initiatives with employer groups. The college keeps the curriculum offer under careful review. Over the years, individual members of staff have forged good links with external experts in a range of disciplines and they use these well to support learners' project work and to provide work experience. New members of the academic staff are developing links with higher education institutions and the support for curriculum development and progression from the new University of South Wales remains strong. Nevertheless, between 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, further education enrolments at the college declined significantly.

5 Leadership and management

There have been significant changes to the way the college operates. It has changed to reflect the new tertiary arrangements with the local authority and as a result of the move to the new college building. College leaders have used these changes to review the organisational structure for leaders and managers at strategic and operational levels. The new structure aims to improve communications throughout the college. In addition, the new responsibility of heads of division for outcomes within their learning areas is intended to have a positive impact on performance.

The Board of Directors understand their roles and fill vacancies by recruiting new members that add to the skill-set of the non-executive directors. The Board work closely with senior managers to establish realistic and challenging targets and are challenging senior staff rigorously to improve performance against KPIs. The college makes effective use of the university's sub-committees and the specialist expertise available at the university.

Leaders at all levels keep the curriculum offer under review and maintain a strong focus on the needs of the local community, particularly for learners who have particular challenges. Leaders understand the need to work closely with partners, particularly with the local schools. Leaders now have a stronger focus on performance; for example, they took appropriate action during the recent difficulties relating to work-based construction and made appropriate changes to the way that quality is reported.

6 Leadership and management (quality assurance)

The new organisational structure has a focus on improving arrangements for quality assurance. The composition of the quality committee supports the new quality assurance role of the heads of division. The college makes effective use of data to underpin action-planning for quality improvement. Self-assessment arrangements are now firmly the responsibility of heads of division at operational levels. Their evaluations are challenged by the quality committee before informing the whole college's self-assessment processes, the self-assessment report and the resulting quality development plan.

Processes are in place to observe classes and there is targeted help for teachers who may need additional support to improve. Staff development activities planned for the coming weeks are aimed at improvement, sharing good practice and embedding new and improved processes. The college works well with other local colleges, particularly in benchmarking, sharing good practice and exchanging observers for peer observations. The college is keeping the new quality processes under review to assess their impact on learners and their commitment to continuous improvement.

7 Summary on progress on the recommendations outlined in the report of March 2010

The recommendations from the last inspection report were made in March 2010 when the college volunteered to be the second of the two pilots for the new common inspection arrangements. The college is making good progress in meeting the recommendations.

The college has improved learner success rates in most learning areas, although a few are still underperforming and the challenge remains to keep up with further education sector improvements more generally. In the last year, the number of underperforming learning areas has reduced and there are plans in place to bring about further improvement.

The college has formed a quality group with other colleges in the region to share good practice in teaching and learning. The group share peer observers and use benchmarking processes to moderate improvements in performance.

The college has improved its arrangements for supporting the Welsh language and bilingualism and promotes the language and culture of Wales. The college has appointed a bilingual champion to bring about improvements in this aspect of provision. Teaching and support staff now have a greater awareness of the college's role and responsibility to increase the bilingual competence of learners. However, the college recognises that it is at an early stage in relation to this objective.

The presentation of self-assessment reports has improved and they are now more self-critical and evaluative. The reports receive greater scrutiny and challenge through the operation of the quality committee and the work of the heads of division. The college has gradually changed the documentation for peer observations of teaching and learning to give greater attention to how learners achieve in class.

The college has improved its arrangements for listening to learners and the results of these processes are used to inform self-assessment. The college has introduced the Learner Assembly, which consists of class representatives as members. This has met five times in the last year, to discuss and agree action on a wide range of learner issues.

Eight hundred and fifty-seven learners from the college completed the learner voice 2014 survey. Eighty per cent of the learners rated the college overall as very good or good. This is slightly above the sector average of 78%. Eighty-five per cent of learners indicated that their course was better than expected or as expected. This is just below the sector average. The strongest response in the learner voice survey was on teaching and training at the college, with 44% rating it as very good, which matches the sector average.

The link inspectors reviewed the actions taken as a result of issues raised by learners in a sub-contracted element of the college's work-based learning provision. These related to the production of portfolio evidence and the completion of qualification documentation. They noted the steps that the college has taken to improve the quality management of the provision for construction skills and an inspector will return to the college in the autumn term to review the situation more fully.

Recommendations

R1 Improve outcomes for the one in five learners who attend courses in learning areas that are underperforming.

Next steps

HMI will continue to monitor overall progress through their link role with the college.

Yours sincerely

Lin Howells
Assistant Director