

Derwentside College

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

Derwentside College is the major provider of post-16 education and training in the semi-rural district of Derwentside. The college's campus is in Consett. The sixth form centre in Lanchester was closed in August 2010. Courses in most subject areas are offered but the curriculum has been refined to expand the vocational provision and reduce the breadth of A-level courses. The number of learners on Train to Gain programmes and apprenticeships has grown significantly.

The college was last inspected in September 2008. At that inspection it was judged to be good overall with a satisfactory capacity to improve. Achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management were judged to be good. Of the five subject areas inspected, health and care, engineering and manufacturing, humanities and social science were judged to be good; hairdressing and beauty therapy and preparation for life and work were satisfactory. This report focuses on the key areas for improvement identified at the last inspection and other aspects of provision emerging through pre-inspection analysis.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

<p>What progress has been made in using quality assurance systems more effectively, so that managers can identify weaknesses and take swift action to tackle them?</p>	<p>Reasonable progress</p>
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At the previous inspection quality assurance procedures were judged to be adequate but with some significant areas for improvement. The self-assessment report was broadly accurate in its identification of the college's key strengths; however, it failed to identify some key areas for improvement. The rigour of annual course reviews was broadly satisfactory but varied between subject areas.

This year the college has taken some important steps in improving both the rigour and impact of quality assurance procedures. A new Director for Curriculum and Quality was appointed in April 2010. Self-assessment processes and course reviews have improved and identify key areas for improvement more precisely. Quality improvement plans contain more specific and measurable targets. There are better links between quality assurance systems, staff development and robust performance management. Self-assessment is informed by data on a broad range of performance; however, the college recognises that better use could be made of the views of learners and employers. Recently, the procedures for validating self-assessment judgements and grades have improved. Although many outcomes for learners improved last year, some of the new quality systems are still being refined and it is too early to see a sustained impact across all subject areas.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving outcomes for learners since the previous inspection?

Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection learners' achievement was judged to be good overall and outstanding for learners aged 16 to 18. Success rates were above the national average and there was a trend of improvement. In 2008/09 there was a significant dip in some success rates due to a decline in the proportion of students retained to the end of their courses. In 2009/10, according to college data, success rates improved to reach, and in many cases exceed, the previous levels. With the exception of some foundation courses, evidence presented by the college shows a much improved picture.

On apprenticeship programmes overall success rates and success rates for learners who complete their qualifications within the time allocated have continued to improve. The success rates of learners on Train to Gain courses are well above the national average. Pass rates on A-level courses are generally high, however, senior managers recognise the need to improve the proportion of students attaining high grades. In 2009/10 the college received a 'Notice to Improve' from the Learning and Skills Council for courses where success rates had fallen below minimum levels of performance. Since that time success rates have improved on all the individual courses identified and now exceed the thresholds, in most cases significantly so.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in the use of lesson observation evidence to improve teaching and learning?

Reasonable progress

At the time of the previous inspection there was an effective system for assuring the quality of teaching and learning. Links between teaching observations, performance management and staff development were clear. However, there were shortcomings in the written recording of lesson observations. The proforma used for observations was too prescriptive and focused observers' attention on teaching processes and activities rather than learning. In a significant minority of cases the evidence recorded did not adequately match the grades awarded.

The college has strengthened the moderation of grades to ensure that appropriate attention is given to the quality of learning. There was a broad agreement between inspectors and college observers on the grades awarded to lessons. However, observers are unable to adopt a flexible approach when recording evidence and are often constrained by the observation paperwork when justifying their judgements. Although analysis of the lesson observation records shows an increased proportion of good or better teaching, in a minority of areas this has not led to a sustained improvement in achievement. Teachers whose lessons are graded satisfactory are given support and then re-observed. The college has little analysis on the impact of this and the work of teaching assistants who provide support for learners in lessons.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in ensuring that the quality of curriculum management is consistently effective so that outcomes for learners are high? **Reasonable progress**

At the time of the previous inspection curriculum management was satisfactory overall. However, in some cases, curriculum managers were not sufficiently well informed about what was happening in their areas of responsibility and spent too little time assuring the quality of the work of their teams.

Since that time the college has restructured the middle-management team and invested considerable resources in their continuing professional development. This is a small college and therefore curriculum managers are responsible for a wide range of disparate vocational areas and often carry an extensive administrative load. The rigour of annual course reviews has improved, although some variation remains. The college recognises that some of the proforma used at the time of the previous inspection did not prompt a sufficiently comprehensive analysis of course performance and is in the process of introducing a more robust process. Curriculum managers reach broadly accurate conclusions when judging the quality of their departments, although in a small number of cases the range of evidence they use is limited. Success rates were judged to be good overall at the previous inspection, although there were some significant dips in performance in 2008/09, most areas of learning have improved or at least maintained their levels of performance.

What progress has been made in enabling governors to hold all aspects of the college's work to account? **Reasonable progress**

At the time of the previous inspection governors provided a strong strategic steer to the college. However, the degree to which they monitored the college's performance was variable. Governors received a wide range of appropriate reports, but some reports received insufficient attention and, in some cases, the minutes did not record sufficiently the discussions that took place.

Since that time, the college has appointed a new clerk to the governors. Minutes are detailed and recording of discussions are more extensive. For example, minutes illustrate that governors have continued to provide a clear strategic direction for the college. The committee structure is well established, although attendance varies and the governing body sometimes finds it difficult to attract new members. They have focused on the need to improve partnership arrangements and the re-alignment of the college's work to meet the previous government's 'skills agenda'. Governors clearly recognised the dip in learners' success rates in 2008/09 and provided some impetus to bring about improvement. Given this experience and improvements to management processes they are now in a better position to analyse data, identify performance trends and hold the college's work to account.

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