

## ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: North Hertfordshire College

Date of visit: 20 November 2006

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit. It focuses on the themes explored during the visit and does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the college's performance.

### Achievement and standards

#### Current achievement and standards

College data for 2005/06 are currently incomplete and the following judgements are made in the light of that fact.

#### Learners aged 16-18

Overall, learners aged 16-18 achieved better than adult learners in 2005/06. At level 1, success rates have risen to broadly the national average at 65%, with increased pass rates, but a slight decline in retention. Achievements at level 2 are good. Success rates are significantly above national average at 70%. In particular, pass rates have improved by ten percentage points in the years between 2004/06 compared to a national average improvement of three percentage points. Level 3 success, retention and pass rates in 2005/06 continued to be broadly at the national average; however, there has been a slight decline in all three areas. Very short course success rates in 2005/06 continue to be at the high national average, but longer short courses have a poor success rate at 58%.

#### Adult learners

As the college has recognised in its self-assessment report (SAR), adult learners' achievements at level 1 and 2 are a cause for concern. In 2005/06 they continued to decline and are significantly below national averages. The impact of Learning Shops is calculated by the college to have contributed to approximately 10% to 12% of the decline at level 1. However, this still leaves success rates at 54%, well below the national average. Level 3 success rates rose to 61%, with a particular increase in retention to 79%. Learners achieve

at the high national average on very short courses, but are below national average on longer short courses.

How effectively is the college addressing the issue of adult achievement? What actions have been taken to improve standards and achievements for learners aged 16-18 on level 3 courses?

The college has undertaken a very detailed analysis of under-performing courses and is able to demonstrate that vigorous and appropriate action has been taken to improve adult achievement and retention. In addition, the impact of the success rates of level 3 learners aged 16-18 from other institutions has been analysed, leading the college to judge that their own learners are achieving better results than the overall data suggest. It is too early to assess the impact of improvement strategies on success rates.

Have the improvements in work-based learning been sustained?

Work-based learning programmes have good success rates overall. However, there are still some areas where performance is only at the national average. Staff have identified that key skills are a barrier to completion and analysed effectively the factors that led to this. Key skills lessons have been moved to the middle of the day to increase attendance. Work with specialist coaches has improved the motivation and involvement of learners.

The e2e programme has low rates of positive outcome and very few learners are progressing into employment. However, the programme structure has changed to focus on outcomes as well as learning. An extended initial assessment continually measures learners' progress and aspirations. Staff with employability training backgrounds have been recruited to improve the pastoral element of the programme. Information, advice and guidance is more focused. It is too early to judge the impact of these measures.

What are the current achievements in key skills?

Key skills achievement has improved, but remains an area for further development. The college has made radical structural changes to support staff in developing more co-ordinated approaches to improve achievement. From March 2006, intensive flexible and individualised support has helped work-based learners to complete their programmes. Framework success rates for 2005/06 were timely, and well above the national average. A new key

skills manager is implementing consistent quality monitoring against strategic targets set by managers.

Specialist staff devolved to vocational areas are mentoring and supporting subject staff to embed key skills in their programmes. This has been coupled with appropriate use of consultancy to build their confidence and understanding in recognising and accrediting key skills. New diagnostic and planning software enables tutorial and key skills staff to monitor differentiated learning programmes effectively.

## Quality of education and training

Is the college on track to achieve 100% coverage with lesson observations?

The college has continued to put teaching and learning at the heart of its improvement strategy. They are currently on track to achieve 100% coverage with their lesson observations, and further improvements have taken place generally to the observation of teaching and learning.

Have further improvements taken place to the lesson observation system? What are the areas of greatest impact on the standards of teaching and learning?

Extensive training has taken place for observers who demonstrate a good level of understanding of their role and confidence in identifying strengths and areas for improvement. The recently introduced 'Essentials for Excellence' folder provides a valuable and practical tool to support improvements.

Lesson plans examined were much improved. However, there were examples of plans with poorly written learning outcomes and others where differentiation was restricted to a general description of learning styles.

The college is now in possession of a substantial amount of data and information about the quality of its teaching and learning which is used well to identify training and development needs and is well aligned with performance management and appraisal. However, there is insufficient use made of other aspects of information including analysis by age, activity and teacher status.

The organisation and moderation of lesson observations is good with clear procedures and well understood processes to arrive at a final grade. The procedure for re-observation is prompt, and there are appropriate support procedures for teachers judged to be less than satisfactory or satisfactory. Curriculum managers do not currently benefit from opportunities to jointly moderate observations. Written observation records, whilst demonstrating an improved focus on learning and assessment, still have insufficient detail and judgement on learners' progress.

The appointment of Advanced Learning Practitioners (ALPs) provides another good opportunity to promote and support high standards in teaching and learning. The impact of various activities connected with teaching and learning has yet to be demonstrated in outcomes for learners as shown in the data. However, planning, differentiation and ILT have been targeted by the college staff training programme, and internal evidence points to the positive impact of this focus. As the college has recognised, the level of staff qualification remains relatively low and should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Does employer engagement continue to be a significant strength of the college?

Employer engagement remains a significant strength of the college with a wide range of creative and stimulating initiatives to develop enterprise in the region. It has been nominated for a number of prestigious awards and has been selected to develop innovative practice in the new Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) methodology. As the leading provider on the Train to Gain consortium, it is co-ordinating and promoting high quality work-based provision in Hertfordshire.

Does support and guidance for part-time adult learners demonstrate the same strengths as that of the rest of the student population?

Provision for adults continues to be remodelled in response to changing government priorities and local conditions. The skills for life and ESOL provision has been restructured and is now co-ordinated into a single welcoming environment that gives learners more status and visibility. A multi-purpose team flexibly plans sessions with learners to meet individual needs.

Initial assessment has been enhanced and is continually revisited to monitor progress and refocus learning as learners gain confidence.

A large New Deal programme delivered in partnership is still at an early stage, but there are signs of good diversification with planned work placements in a variety of vocational areas. Good arrangements are in place to support jobseekers with literacy and numeracy needs in the newly remodelled skills base centre. Learners with severe disabilities are well supported in 'The Briar Patch' in an effective partnership with Springboard. Well co-ordinated arrangements encourage learners to develop independent living skills and many of them progress into externally supported accommodation.

## Leadership and management

How well established and supported is the new structure for the college?

The principal continues to provide strong leadership and enjoys the firm confidence of governors, senior and middle managers interviewed. The recent restructuring is well supported and, although at an early stage, provides an increased coherence and ability to manage curriculum areas and cross-college functions effectively through the six specialist academies. The organisation of governance has been changed to reflect the structure, and again, although at an early stage, presents a coherent and well supported structure.

How effectively is the issue of variable curriculum management being addressed?

The issue of variable quality of curriculum management has been addressed vigorously through staffing changes and training. The significant reduction of teaching hours for curriculum managers demonstrates the college's commitment to improving and focusing on managing provision effectively. The appointment of external mentors for all curriculum managers is another positive and interesting development.

## Are curriculum SARs of uniform high quality?

The SAR process is clear, inclusive and well understood by all levels of staff interviewed. Course reviews examined had improved levels of evaluative judgement although, as the college has recognised, this remains an area for further development. The recent advances in the quality and accessibility of data have improved the level of analysis and confidence with which such information is used.

## Learners' views

The institution of regular review weeks is welcomed and valued by both learners and staff. Learners interviewed spoke very positively about their support, both in and out of class and the improved teaching they received. Resources were stated to be excellent and they particularly praised the college virtual learning environment (VLE) system.