

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Abingdon and Witney College

Date of visit: 28 November 2007

Context

Abingdon and Witney College is a large general further education college, and is the main provider of further education in the Vale of the White Horse and West Oxfordshire. It also serves a major part of South Oxfordshire. In 2005/06 the college had over 10,750 learners on roll. Of these 2,198 were aged 16 to 18, and 8,553 were over 19. Sixty-five per cent of all enrolments were for learners aged over 19 and 52% of full time equivalent learners were aged over 19. Approximately half of the learners aged 16 to 18 were on level 3 programmes, and nearly 60% of adult learners were on L1 and 2 programmes.

The college has a low proportion of learners from widening participation postcode areas. About 7% of learners are of minority ethnic origin, compared to 3.3% of the population of Oxfordshire. The college offers courses in all 15 of the subject sector areas, though numbers in construction, history, philosophy and theology, social sciences and education and training are small.

The college was last inspected in 2003. At that inspection, leadership and management were judged to be satisfactory. In curriculum areas, the college was awarded 5 grade 2s and 7 grade 3s. Work-based learning was not graded separately. Guidance and support and educational and social inclusion were judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Has the college maintained the improvements in performance at all levels for learners aged 16 to 18 evident in 2005/06 and for adult learners at level 3?	No discernible progress
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Based on the college data for 2007 available at the time of the visit, success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 declined sharply at level 1, declined a little at level 2 and remained the same at level 3. Success rates for level 1 long provision dropped from

70% in 2006 and were at 58% for 2007. The college believes that this figure has been affected by changes in provision in courses offered as additional qualifications for full-time learners, and also expresses concerns that there are some errors in start and end dates, still to be rectified. The college's analysis of courses of over 250 guided learning hours, which are mostly courses for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, indicates that success rates have improved from 76% to 85%. Success rates for adult learners on level 3 courses remain static at 71% in 2007.

The college's data entry was not fully complete at the time of the visit. Comparison between college data for November 2006 and the final performance report for 2005/06 shows that the final validated success rates for courses for 16 to 18 year olds, at levels 1 and 2, are higher than the college rates in the previous November. The rates for level 3 are the same. For adults, success rates on level 3 courses improved by 5 percentage points when comparing the college's unvalidated data in November and the final success rates for 2005/06.

How much progress has been made in raising achievement where it was below average, particularly 19+ level 1 and 2, AS-levels and key skills, and timely success rates for apprentices?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates for learners aged over 19 on long level 1 courses improved from 51% in 2006 to 72% in 2007 and are now above average. On long level 2 courses they declined further, dropping from 71% in 2005, 63% in 2006 and 50% in 2007, based on the college's provisional data. The college's analysis shows significant improvement in success rates for level 1 and 2 basic skills and ESOL courses. There was a significant drop in the numbers of enrolments in 2006/07, particularly at level 1.

Success rates on AS-level courses show little improvement in 2007. Overall rates have risen by 2 percentage points, but remain below average. The college offers AS courses in seven sector subject areas. Success rates have improved in five of these, but remain below average in six. Success rates in science and mathematics, social sciences and business were below 50%. Overall success rates on A-level courses remained static on 2007 and are just below the national average. They are above average in three of the six sector subject areas.

Key skills results for learners aged 16 to 18 improved in 2007, particularly at levels 1 and 2. No data relating to adult learners taking key skills was examined during the visit. Success rates at level 1 improved from 18% to 49% and are now broadly in line with national averages. While level 2 success rates improved from 7% to 31%, they remain below average. Very few learners took level 3 key skills and success rates

remain below average. The overall number of enrolments in key skills declined by 40%, due to the changes in the college's entry criteria and initial assessment processes.

The college has significantly reduced its work-based learning provision, including removing some sub-contracted provision in amenity horticulture, where timely success rates were low in 2005/06. In 2006/07 it recruited 12 apprentices to its own amenity horticulture programme and success rates are now 77%.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving the overall quality of teaching and learning and in addressing weakness identified through lesson observations?	Reasonable progress
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The college has continued to develop its systems for the internal observation of lessons. The process is rigorous and is used to support staff appraisal and development. Where lessons are graded satisfactory or inadequate, teachers have agreed action plans for improvement, and are re-observed. Evidence shows that lessons grades have improved following appropriate interventions and training.

The current lesson observation process is still relatively new and the grade profile indicates that lesson observations are in line with averages for similar colleges. The teaching and learning review highlights the strengths and weaknesses in lessons, and areas such as lesson planning, previously identified as a weakness by the college, are now identified as strengths.

What progress has been made in setting learners challenging targets and monitoring their progress through tutorials and the use of individual learning plans (ILPs)?	Reasonable progress
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In September 2007 the college introduced a 'meeting the standards' initiative. The standards related to attendance, punctuality and meeting deadlines for assignments. This has proved successful in reducing the number who leave within the first few weeks following induction, though the college acknowledges it is too early to determine the full impact on retention rates. Successful learners are rewarded at the end of six weeks with a letter of congratulations on 'meeting the standard'. The tutorial system is well embedded for all full-time and substantial part time learners. Tutors use the reviews to help set personal and qualification targets.

All learners have an ILP. They are well documented for the learners with learning difficulties or disabilities and detail clear actions for improvement. However, some other ILPs contain scant information about progress and achievement and provide few measurable targets. The use of staff to foster learner engagement has improved the monitoring of attendance and punctuality.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in improving its financial position?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in dealing with its financial deficit from 2004/05. In 2006/07 the college had achieved a significant surplus, and was able to invest in refurbishing accommodation and in ICT facilities. Procedures for budget allocation and monitoring have been strengthened, and the college is on course to meet the LSC financial targets this year. Internal audit in September 2007 judged financial management and resource planning to be good.

How much progress has been made towards improving accommodation on both the Abingdon and Witney campuses?	Reasonable progress
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The college has advanced plans for re-developing its site at Witney, supported by the LSC, with work planned to commence in June 2008. Managers are commencing work on plans for significant re-development of the Abingdon site, intending to start work in 2009/10. The college's improved financial position has enabled them to invest in a range of accommodation improvements, including a new beauty studio, a programme of classroom refurbishment, improvements to the student refectory and social area and provision of a further 200 computers and related software upgrades. The college has been working with teaching staff on a range of strategies to improve the learning environment.