

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Newbury College

Date of visit: 17 October 2007

Context

Newbury College is the only general further education college in West Berkshire. It relocated to its present 40 acre green field site, as a private finance initiative pathfinder, in September 2002. Its catchment is predominantly rural, including West Berkshire, Reading and North Hampshire. Unemployment rates for West Berkshire are the lowest in the south east. The college is medium sized and the majority of students are adults on part time programmes. Many part time courses are delivered in the community. Over two thirds of the full time students are aged 16-18. The large majority of students are of White British background.

Last inspection

Newbury College was last inspected in March 2006. At that inspection, leadership and management were judged to be satisfactory. The quality of provision and teaching and learning were also judged to be satisfactory. Guidance and support and the college's response to educational and social inclusion were judged to be good. In curriculum areas, the college was awarded one good and six satisfactory grades.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in improving success, retention and achievement rates?	Reasonable progress
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College data show that the success rate for all students has improved since the last inspection to just below the national average. The overall rate for long courses rose in 2006/07 by nine percentage points and is now at the national average, due mainly to improvements at level 1, and by adults. Success rates for short courses also increased. Success rates still vary between curriculum areas, and between subjects. Subjects that demonstrate particularly low success include sports, motor vehicle, and arts and media.

Achievement and retention of adults for most lengths and levels of courses increased in 2006/07. For learners aged 16-18, there was an improvement in pass rates for long courses at levels 1 and 2, but a small decline in others. However, there was also an increase in retention rates for most courses, apart from long courses at level 2.

What progress has been made in improving success rates for apprentices?	Insufficient progress
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Overall framework success rates for work-based learners increased significantly in 2005/06, but in 2006/07 the small improvement to 46% did not keep pace with the increase nationally. Consequently, overall success rates are below national averages. The rate for adult advanced apprentices has improved considerably and, at 63%, is now above the national average. However, success rates for all other apprenticeships are low. Too many learners in motor vehicle apprenticeships, and engineering advanced apprenticeships, leave the course without achieving their frameworks. Timely success rates have increased overall since 2004/05 and are now in line with the national average. However, in 2006/07 the rates for adult learners did not improve at the same rate as those nationally, and are now below average.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving students' experiences through the revised curriculum enrichment system?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection the college was judged to have a wide range of enrichment activities for which participation rates were low. In 06/07 the college implemented a new programme in response to the students' requests for activities to be meaningful. There is now an expectation on all subject areas to provide curriculum-related activities, such as trips, visits, and speakers, to enhance student learning. These are complemented by a variety of cross-college extra-curricular activities, such as sports, and creative and charity events. Learners welcome this development and the college reports that participation has increased considerably since the last inspection. However, the college does not yet systematically analyse participation in, or the success of, the activities.

What progress has been made in the actions to improve the quality of teaching, including sharing of good practice?	Reasonable progress
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The college has increased significantly its emphasis on improving the quality of teaching. It has introduced a more robust lesson observation scheme which is moderated twice a year. Teaching staff are observed at least once each year and are graded on teaching, learning and attainment, with an overall grade. However, individual action plans resulting from unsatisfactory grades are not always monitored or reviewed effectively. The college has accurately identified areas for improvement. For example, the grades from observations of lessons by part-time staff are generally lower than for full-time staff, but plans are not yet in place to address this.

The college has benefited from assistance by an external consultant in developing the scheme. Teachers appreciate the action-planning provided from observations and report that the subsequent support has improved.

Staff have frequent opportunities to share good practice at course team meetings. During 2007-08, the college plans to identify practitioners of consistently high quality teaching to share good practice across the college. Peer observation is currently being trialled on a voluntary basis, and a mentoring scheme is at the early stages of development. It is too early to assess the impact of these initiatives.

Leadership and management

What improvement has been made to course reviews, particularly with those curriculum areas that are performing less well?	Reasonable progress
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The quality and accuracy of termly course reviews have improved. Section leaders work with their teams, informed by students and feedback from student surveys, to identify strengths, areas for improvement and action plans within their programme areas. Section managers use this information effectively to summarise the main areas for action planning, which are then used to inform the self-assessment process.

The quality improvement plan is comprehensive and is developed in parallel with the self-assessment report. It incorporates the course review action plans, and also cross-college action plans. The college has clearly identified those curriculum areas that are performing less well and developed relevant strategies for improvement.

What progress has been made in assessing the impact of quality systems and the rigour of subsequent action planning?	Reasonable progress
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The college has strengthened the focus on improving quality systems, particularly to monitor teaching and the performance of curriculum areas. A teaching and quality manager has recently been appointed. The database of lesson observations is used effectively for the analysis of trends, and for development planning. There is wider involvement, and raised awareness, of staff in planning actions for quality improvement.

Actions from the self-assessment report and quality improvement plan are reviewed by a quality panel each month. Appropriate targets and success criteria are set, with clear timeframes and responsibilities. The review process is thorough and a well-established 'traffic light' system is used to assess and record progress.