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MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Herefordshire College of Technology

Date of visit: 19 February 2008

Context

Herefordshire College of Technology is medium-sized and shares a city centre campus with a sixth form college and an arts college. It serves Hereford city, as well as the sparsely populated, rural county of Herefordshire. The first phase of a major building project on the college's campus is due for completion by March 2008. During 2006/07, and in the current year, a considerable number of students and resources have been moved successfully into temporary accommodation to allow for the building work. The college had part ownership of a campus south of the city at Holme Lacy used for farriery, blacksmithing and rural craft provision. Following a merger between the college and part of Pershore College in August 2007, which previously occupied the other part of the Holme Lacy campus, it now has ownership of the whole campus and the attached Pound Farm. The provision gained by the college through merger is largely in land-based subjects.

In 2006/07 the college enrolled 3,708 LSC funded students, of whom about a third studied full-time. The largest number of enrolments was at level 1. Adults outnumbered younger students. The percentage of students from minority ethnic heritage is very low and mirrors that of the local population. Male students had represented the larger number of enrolments in 2005/06, however, in 2006/07, female enrolments were higher in number than those from males. The college offers provision in most subject sector areas. It ceased offering GCE A and AS level provision in 2007/08. The college was last inspected in May 2006.

Achievement and standards

To what extent has progress been made in improving success rates, particularly for adults and in key skills, since the last inspection visit?	Reasonable progress

In 2006/07, there was a mixed picture of improvement in long courses success rates. Success rates at level 2 are high with significant improvement in the rate for adults following a sharp decline in 2005/06. Success rates for adults at levels 1 and 3 improved, largely because of better pass rates. The improvement was most marked at level 1; however, this rate is just below average. Little improvement is evident in success rates for students aged 16 to 18 years at levels 1 and 3. Low retention rates

contribute significantly at these levels and success rates are well below average at level 1 and 3. Concern about these low rates has caused considerable and rapid action by managers, who have introduced a full range of measures to monitor students at risk of withdrawing and poorly performing courses. Retention of current students at the time of the visit has improved compared to the previous year.

Success rates in key skill qualifications show considerable improvement. All rates at levels 1 and 2 in all three core subjects have improved substantially and are well above average. Considerable emphasis, training and support has been put in place to ensure success in key skills on courses run at the Holme Lacy campus, where, at a previous inspection, low success rates were an area for improvement. Early signs indicate positive results in the use of contextualised assignments and prompt attention to portfolio building and preparation for external tests.

What further progress has been made in improving work-based learning success rates, including timeliness since the last inspection visit?	Significant progress

The strongly improving trend in overall framework success rates noted at the last inspection visit in November 2006 has been sustained in 2006/07. Overall success rates for apprenticeships are well above average. Improvement in timely success rates in 2006/07 was less marked than in the previous year, and closer to the national rate. However, rates remain well above average. Apprentices make better than expected progress compared to their prior attainment.

Overall performance for 2006/07 masks some areas of weaker performance in the sector subject areas of engineering and manufacturing technologies, information and communication technology (ICT) and business administration and law. Weaker performance is due largely to historical issues which have now been resolved. Framework completion for the advanced apprenticeship in construction planning and the built environment has improved from a very low base in 2004/05 to close to average in 2006/07 and in-year data show continuing improvements.

Management of the transfer of work-based learning courses from Pershore college provision based at Holme Lacy, to Herefordshire college procedures has been highly effective. Framework success rates had been low and an area for improvement at the last inspection, but these improved considerably in 2006/07. In the newly merged college, staff at Holme Lacy report good support and clear lines of accountability for this provision. There has been good recruitment onto agricultural apprenticeships.

Quality of provision

How have the lesson observation programme and staff training activities been used to support improvements in teaching and learning, including in the use of ILT?	Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection, the college has implemented a range of strategies to bring about improvement in differentiated teaching and learning strategies and the use of information and learning technology (ILT). Staff development days have been productive in raising awareness of these issues and providing better guidance and support. As a result, teachers feel more able to share and discuss good practice. However, the college self-assesses both aspects as requiring further improvement.

A more robust observation process is now in place which teachers report as rigorous and fair. Nearly all teachers are observed; however not all results are used effectively in self-assessment, resulting in an incomplete picture of the quality of lessons. Less effective lessons are identified clearly with closely monitored interventions and support put in place. Evidence in the current year show improvements in the grades awarded to lessons previously graded as satisfactory. The use of peer observations by specialist staff from other colleges, as well as the use of an external consultant to moderate the results of observations is valued by managers, observers and teachers. Good use has been made of external moderation to improve the accuracy of judgements and grades. Action points resulting from observations are linked to appraisals and staff development effectively. Some action plans lack specific targets and are not focused sufficiently on priority areas such as the use of ILT or integration of basic skills.

Significant investment in access to technology for both staff and students, particularly at the Holme Lacy campus, is part of the strong focus on improving the effective use of ILT. Staff training in e-learning includes pod casting and video conferencing and a cross-college group is championing ILT use.

What progress has been made in developing skills for life provision in the college?	Reasonable progress

The college has worked effectively to produce a clear skills for life strategy. A detailed action plan with specific targets and identified responsibilities outlines implementation of the strategy. The plan supports a college-wide approach to embedding skills for life within each curriculum area. The skills for life co-ordinator is working effectively with all curriculum areas to identify and implement this approach, supported by staff development activities and a cross-college skills for life team. Implementation is complete in hairdressing and has supported increased progression to level 2, but the rate of implementation is more varied in other curriculum areas.

Overall, success rates for skills for life qualifications in 2006/07 are satisfactory, although for ESOL programmes they remain low.

Leadership and management

How have quality assurance arrangements, including self-assessment, been further developed, especially in the merged provision at the Holme Lacy campus?	Reasonable progress

There has been rapid and effective implementation of quality assurance arrangements in the merged provision at Holme Lacy. This has resulted in a completed self-assessment report for 2006/07 for this provision, despite considerable challenges in establishing a broadly accurate dataset for previous year's performance. In addition, quality assurance logs for curriculum areas have been completed for the autumn term, and are being used effectively to monitor the quality of provision and bring about improvement. Considerable, productive support over a very short timescale has been provided to staff undertaking these activities.

In the college as a whole, staff more becoming increasingly confident in the use of performance data, although the wide range of formats used creates some confusion. The self-assessment process has been further refined. There are some good examples of evaluation, but there is still a tendency to claim normal practice as a strength in a few instances. Two very recent and much-needed audits of tutorial practice have proved useful in improving this aspect of provision.

What progress has been made in bringing about improvements in leadership and management of provision at the Holme Lacy campus?	Significant progress

Senior managers have taken highly effective action in a short timescale, to bring about improvements to leadership and management at the Holme Lacy campus. Notwithstanding a number of major challenges, especially in improving accommodation, ensuring appropriate maintenance arrangements such as heating are in place and updating and extending the ICT resource base, considerable improvement has taken place in the learning environment. Senior and middle managers have worked hard on areas needing improvement and the morale of staff new to the college is improving post-merger. The land-based specialism of the campus, including its organic status, has been preserved along with a broad curriculum covering almost all land-based subject areas. A senior manager with a land-based background has been recruited promptly and is an example of the high profile given to this aspect of the college's provision by both senior managers and governors.

To what extent is implementation of equality and diversity action plans progressing?	Reasonable progress

A published action plan is in place to implement the college's race equality policy, which is monitored annually, although this monitoring is not recorded formally. A considerable emphasis on the use of equality and diversity measures is now placed on course teams and incorporated into the termly evaluation of provision using quality assurance logs. There are good examples of how teachers are considering equality and diversity carefully when developing teaching and learning strategies. Data on the diversity of student groups at the college are available and monitored annually, but data specific to gender and ethnicity are not used fully in self-assessment to monitor the achievement of these different groups.