

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: North Hertfordshire College

Date of visit: 15 April 2008

Context

North Hertfordshire College is a large general further education college. The college is located in the towns of Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth, serving a population of around 200,000 people. The college operates from four main centres. The college also provides courses at other venues, including schools, learning shops, community centres and the premises of local employers.

The college provides courses in 14 of the 15 subject sector areas, with no land-based provision. Courses range from pre-entry to level 4. The college has two Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), one in management and the second in sport and fitness coaching. The college also provides adult and community learning courses.

Hertfordshire is generally an affluent county with high levels of professional and management employment and high educational aspirations. The proportion of school leavers with five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades at A*-C in Hertfordshire is well above the national average. The unemployment rate in Hertfordshire is below the national level. Despite this relatively affluent profile there are also some significant pockets of local deprivation in areas served by the college, particularly in the district authority of Stevenage. The main catchment covers the two districts of Stevenage and North Hertfordshire.

Last inspection and AAV

North Hertfordshire College was last inspected in May 2006 and was judged to be good overall with good capacity to improve. Four curriculum areas were judged to be good and three satisfactory. This is the second monitoring visit following the inspection.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in improving learner outcomes?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates continue to improve and the rate of improvement is better than the national rate for level 1 courses and for adults at level 3. The success rate for long courses for learners aged 16-18 in 2006/07 is likely to be around the national average, but although a significant improvement on 2005/06, the overall long success rate for adult learners is likely to remain below. Retention is improving, with the exception of level 2 for learners aged 16 to 18. Achievement has improved on most long courses, with the exception of level 1 for learners aged 16 to 18 and level 2 for adults. Success rates for adult learners on level 2 courses are particularly low. There is some variability of performance across departments.

In 2006/07 success rates at level 1 and 2 for learners aged 16 to 18 increased by 1% each compared with 2005/06 and level 3 success rates rose by 7% following a fall the previous year. These rates are likely to be around the national average. The college recognises that although success rates for short courses have improved year on year to 69%, they remain well below the 2005/06 national average of 76%. The college has addressed this by ceasing to offer additional courses on learners' main courses. Success rates for learners aged 14 to 16 at 76% are improving, although progression to other courses at the college is 67%. For adult learners, at level 1 success rates recovered to around the national average in 2006/07 following a large drop in 2005/06 year. Success rates at level 2 improved by eight percentage points in 2006/07 to 59%, but are still well below the national average. This is due largely to poor retention and achievement on information technology courses at college 'learning shops', which provision has reduced substantially in 2007/08. Success rates rose significantly at level 3 to 71% and are likely to be above the national average. Higher level success rates improved in 2006/07 to broadly in line with national averages.

The college has graded achievement and standards as good in the self-assessment report but data provided for 2006/07 indicates a satisfactory judgement. No analysis of success rates by ethnicity or gender was provided in the self-assessment.

What progress has been made in improving outcomes in work-based learning?	Reasonable progress
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The organisation of work-based learning courses has improved following a restructure of the work based learning management team, including the appointment of a work based learning manager. The successful achievement of national vocational qualifications (NVOs) for Train to Gain learners is good at 88%. For work-based learners, the overall success rates for advanced apprentices and

apprentices show an improving trend since 2004/05 but remain below the national averages. Timely achievement rates are improving and above the national average. The in-year success rate is currently 57% with a target of 65%.

The college has recognised that Entry to Employment (E2E) learners are underperforming. Learners on the E2E course now have a revised timetable that includes a focus on employability skills and a range of enrichment activities. Success rates are improving from 45% in 2005/06 to 57% in 2006/07. The in-year success rate stands at 54% currently.

What progress has been made in improving key skills achievement?	Insufficient progress
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In 2006/07 learners' success rates in key skills were low with achievements in application of number and level 2 communication well below national averages. The college has reorganised the cross-college management of key skills, with key skills teaching managed through the curriculum areas rather than centrally. Work is underway to integrate key skills into the curriculum, although this is at an early stage. This is supported through regular meetings, assessment of learners' skill levels and target setting. The key skills quality improvement plan is thorough and well documented providing an analysis of areas for improvement, actions, targets, timescales and progress.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in increasing the proportion of teaching that is good or better?	Reasonable progress
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The proportion of good and better teaching in 2006/07 improved to 57% from 50% in 2005/06. Of the observations conducted to date in 2007/08 this proportion has increased further to 67%, although the proportion of unsatisfactory teaching remains broadly the same. The college has introduced software to analyse observations by teacher status, course level and learner type to target development activities more effectively but this analysis is at an early stage. The college has prioritised the observation of teachers graded less than good for 2007/08. Teachers graded outstanding also continue to be observed in order that good practice can be shared across college. Staff development activities are linked well to the development of teaching and learning, including whole day events which involve the advanced learning practitioners and subject learning coaches in demonstrating teaching and learning techniques. The moderation process of observation records is at an early stage, but has already identified training in the writing of observation records as an area for development. The effectiveness of in-class learning support is assessed through a separate observation process led by the learning support manager but is

not sufficiently well integrated into the college teaching and learning observation process.

What progress has been made in improving the curriculum and increasing participation in vocationally relevant enrichment activities?	Significant progress
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Significant progress has been made in developing the quality and range of enrichment activities. These are provided through curriculum areas, a college-wide course, tutorials and the Student Union. Many activities include clear links for learners in the development of their employability skills. The appointment of a cross-college employer engagement manager and part-time managers in the curriculum areas provides the college with a focussed overview of the overall performance in designing and implementing enrichment activities. Learners provide a clear input to the enrichment programme. Audits are made of the cross college enrichment activities, down to course level, and these provide the opportunity to share good practice and to promote activities to a wider audience. The college is active in linking enrichment activities to the Every Child Matters (ECM) themes and an action plan to support further developments is in place. Managers have analysed the quality and quantity of activities clearly and identified areas for future improvement.

The college is active in developing its curriculum offer. It has responded by moving towards a provision that offers relevant accredited qualifications to learners and reducing courses additional to learners' main courses where success rates have been less than satisfactory. For example, construction, motor vehicle and engineering courses will be delivered in a newly developed skills centre.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in strengthening the effectiveness of target setting at course level?	Reasonable progress
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The college has a clear target setting and monitoring policy and has implemented systems to measure the effectiveness of its activities. College managers recognised that course teams were not involved in target setting and performance monitoring and introduced processes to increase the involvement of staff at all levels. In the curriculum areas where the process is used effectively, staff and learners are involved in setting course and individual targets and monitoring outcomes to evaluate their performance. However, the curriculum areas are at different stages in the process of adopting and implementing target setting.

What progress has been made in embedding effective and consistent curriculum management?	Reasonable progress
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Clear roles and responsibilities for academy heads and their deputies have been embedded effectively since the management restructure in November 2006. Managers have access to information to support them in improving outcomes for learners further and are more closely involved in self-assessment. A course of development activities, including external mentors, has supported managers well in improving their practice. Monthly off-site sessions enable managers to reflect on their performance, develop their skills and knowledge, share good practice and to grow in confidence in their more strategic roles. A significant reduction of teaching hours for curriculum managers has enabled them to focus on developing their curricula portfolio more effectively. The role of course team leader is developing across college and is effective in supporting curriculum managers in the course review process. Managers feel well supported by senior management and value the recognition they receive when achieving above expectations.