

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Askham Bryan College
Date of visit: 26 February 2009

Context

Askham Bryan College is a land-based college with its main site situated close to York, several substantial centres across North Yorkshire and one near Middlesbrough. It was inspected in November 2007 when it was judged satisfactory overall, in all cross-college aspects, and in the four curriculum areas inspected. The monitoring visit of May 2008 judged that progress had been reasonable or significant in all aspects considered.

Much has happened since the previous inspection. The new Principal has been in post for 18 months. A new chair of governors and a clerk have been appointed. The senior management structure has been reshaped and many new appointments made. Several positions have been filled by managers who used to work in outstanding colleges. The college's mission and values statement has been reviewed. Academic support tutor positions have been created, a role new to the college, and 13 tutors appointed to them. Several staff have taken redundancy packages. New contracts of employment and pay spines have been established, new vision and values statements introduced, landscape construction provision has been expanded, a new teaching block built at Guisborough, and new student accommodation at the main site. The information and learning technology infrastructure has been improved.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in raising success rates in further education and work-based provision?	Significant progress
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Success rates are now good or better in most categories of further education (FE) provision. The overall college success rate for long courses has improved steadily and markedly against the national average for similar colleges. It has moved from being well below the average in 2004/05 to be well above the average and clearly in the top quartile of similar colleges, in 2007/08.

For students aged 16 to 18:

- The trend in the overall success rate mirrors that for all students, a move from well below average to well above, and again in the top quartile of similar colleges in 2008.
 - The success rate for courses at level 1 has moved from well below average to well above, clearly in the top quartile, in this period.
 - At levels 2 and 3 the rate has improved from being well below to a position above the average, but not clearly in the top quartile at either level.

For adult students:

- The success rate has moved from a position at the national average in 2004/05 to one which is clearly above the average in 2008.
 - The success rates at levels 1 and 3 are high, both well above the top quartile of similar colleges in 2008. At level 1, the rate has maintained a high position with respect to the national average in the three years to 2008. At level 3, the rate has improved markedly, improving from its position at the average in 2006.
 - The level 2 rate fell in 2008 and was well below average in that year. The college self-assessment report (SAR) notes this and the college is addressing the issue appropriately. Retention so far this year is high on the floristry and horticulture level 2 national certificates.

Apprenticeship framework overall success rates have improved. The rate for level 2 apprenticeships has improved markedly, from being low in 2006 to a position above the average in 2008. For advanced apprenticeships the rate has also improved markedly moving from very low, below 10% in 2006 to 50% in 2008, but is still below average. The timely success rate for level 2 apprenticeships is now above average. That for advanced apprenticeships, although improving, is still below average.

Key skills success rates have improved markedly. At level 1 the rates are now above 90% for both application of number and communications. At level 2 the rates have improved to be close to 50% in communications but still only 40% in application of number.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in developing the colleges 14 to 19 curriculum?	Significant progress
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The previous inspection noted that the college responds well to the needs of the community and industry and that it is an active partner in projects to enable school pupils to benefit from college facilities.

The college has maintained its strong links with schools and is strengthening its links with other colleges. It works with nearly all the area partnerships in North Yorkshire (Craven College takes the lead in its area), and with about 50 schools. The college judges that it has strong links with about 30 of these. It provides accredited courses (mainly first certificates and diplomas with work experience) in several vocational areas for 400 school pupils aged 14 to 16, achieving high success rates. There are formal recruitment procedures including an interview. Progress is monitored closely and reported back to the schools appropriately. Pupil attendance and behaviour is tightly managed and teachers have received professional development in classroom management.

The level 1 new diploma in land and the environment is due to start in September 2009 for schools in York and the level 3 diploma, open to all prospective students, will be offered at the college, also from September. Plans are advanced to expand the offer during the next two years. The college's 14 to 16 curriculum group has a standing agenda item on the section leaders' team meetings, helping to promote and strengthen the work in the college.

Partnership agreements are in place with several FE colleges, for example to promote progression to Askham Bryan and widen participation in land-based activity generally.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the management of key skills and Skills for Life provision?	Reasonable progress
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The college is continuing to improve its approach to the delivery of key skills and success rates have improved significantly. A Skills for Life strategy is now in place, which includes appropriate targets to increase the proportion of staff with specialist qualifications in literacy and numeracy and raise the understanding of staff across the college. There is in-class support for students requiring additional support with literacy and numeracy and there are plans to strengthen this further with additional individual or small group support where appropriate. Key skills teaching and assessment is completed much earlier in the course.

What progress has been made in strengthening the links between the observation of teaching, staff appraisal and professional development?	Reasonable progress
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There is a rigorous system in place to monitor teaching and learning. The observation team is now composed of a team of seven senior managers who have received training. Internal and external moderation is in place. At the time of the monitoring visit, 70% of lessons observed were graded as good or better by the college. Students are positive about their teaching and learning. There are appropriate links between the observations of lessons and staff development. This is at an individual and whole college level. Follow-up training and monitoring is in place for staff where lessons are graded as satisfactory or inadequate. The college is in the process of developing this further via a system of subject coaches and peer observations. Links with appraisal are planned but this has not yet taken place. In addition to follow-up with individual teachers, the college evaluates best practice in teaching and learning across the college and general areas for improvement and this is used well to inform staff development sessions.

What progress has been made in embedding the section leader and course manager roles and empowering these people to take decisions?	Reasonable progress
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The self-assessment report says that the role of the curriculum section leader has “grown and matured”. Professional development has been provided to help improve the use of management software, for example for timetabling and achievement data, and to help section leaders evaluate the student achievement data they are provided with. Their roles and responsibilities have been clarified. Administrative and student support burdens have been reduced by the appointment of administrative officers in the sections and academic support tutors. Access to pro-achieve has been improved. There is now a much closer liaison between curriculum leaders and farm and other resource managers, enabling much better use of the college’s land-based resources for teaching and learning.

What progress has been made in developing the support and professional development given to part-time teachers?	Reasonable progress
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Part-time staff are entitled to participate in all aspects of the staff development programme and their attendance is monitored. In addition, they are paid to attend specific briefing sessions. Part-time teachers are observed in the same way as full-time staff and appropriate professional development is put in place where necessary.

What progress has been made in improving the financial position of the college?	Significant progress
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The college's financial position has improved significantly. Further education recruitment has increased, and was above target in both 2007/8 and 2008/9. Target recruitment in 2008/9 for both work-based learning and higher education has been met. Student accommodation is full and the college is using accommodation at the York racecourse jockey quarters. Teachers are teaching more hours per week and there has been a substantial reduction in the proportion of the teaching delivered by part-time teachers. Staffing costs have been reduced markedly.

Other aspects of provision

Staff spoken to during the visit said that the college had needed change, it had been widespread and that the management of change had been well managed and introduced 'gently'. The senior management team, they said, was responsive and readily available to college staff.

Thirteen academic support tutors, called 'Angels' have been appointed, relieving teachers and course leaders of pastoral care duties and progress review. The system is being carefully monitored this year. Students generally appreciate the additional help this offers but find communication between tutors and course teachers is always well developed. There are plans to move from paper based to electronic individual learning plans and electronic registers, with pilot arrangements being conducted in some curriculum areas.