

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: North Hertfordshire College

Date of visit: 16 June 2009

Context

North Hertfordshire College (the college) is a large general further education college with around 3,500 learners aged 16 to 18 and around 5,000 adults. The college is located in the towns of Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth, serving a population of around 200,000 people. The college operates from five main centres. The college also provides courses at other venues, including schools, community centres and the premises of local employers. Around two thirds of learners, by full-time equivalence, are aged 16 to 18 and one third adults. Just over a half of learners are female. The proportion of learners from minority ethnic groups at 17% is higher than for the population of North Hertfordshire of 10%. The main catchment area covers the two districts of Stevenage and North Hertfordshire.

The college provides courses in 14 of the 15 sector subject areas, with the exception of land-based provision. Courses range from pre-entry to level 4. The college also provides adult and community learning and learndirect courses. Around 300 learners aged 14 to 16 attend the college one day per week following vocational courses.

The proportion of school leavers with five or more GCSE grades A* to C in Hertfordshire is well above the national average, with Stevenage and Welwyn Hatfield performing below the regional average in GCSE attainment. At 2.8%, the unemployment rate in Hertfordshire is below the national level. Despite this profile there are also some significant pockets of local deprivation in areas served by the college, particularly in Stevenage. The college has founder college status for the creative industries, a centre of excellence in sport, and academy status for financial services.

Previous inspection and monitoring visit

North Hertfordshire College was last inspected in May 2006 and was judged to be good overall with a good capacity to improve. Four curriculum areas were judged to be good and three satisfactory. At the monitoring visit in April 2008 significant progress was judged to have been made in improving the curriculum and participation in enrichment. Reasonable progress was judged to have been made in improving learner outcomes, in increasing the proportion of teaching that is good or better, in strengthening the effectiveness of target setting at course level and in embedding effective and consistent curriculum management. However, insufficient progress was judged to have been made in improving key skills achievement. This is the third monitoring visit following the inspection.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in improving learners' outcomes?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates have improved each year since the previous inspection and at a rate double that nationally. For 2007/08, they are around the national average overall. They are higher for learners aged 16 to 18, but the rate of improvement for adult learners has been greater. Retention is improving at all levels and college data for 2008/09 at the time of the monitoring visit indicate further improvement, significantly so at level 3 for learners aged 16 to 18 and for adults at levels 1 and 2. Achievement has improved at all levels with the exception of a three-point decline at level 3 for 16 to 18 learners in 2007/08. Some variability of performance exists across departments.

At level 1 and for learners aged 16 to 18 on level 2 courses success rates are above national averages. While success rates for adults on level 2 courses remain low they are improving at a greater rate than nationally. Level 3 success rates remain broadly in line with national averages. For learners aged 14 to 16 success rates improved substantially in 2007/08 with progression to other courses in the college also improving. Learners on level 3 courses broadly achieve in line with their peers nationally, with the exception of national diploma courses where performance is above the national average. Attendance is improving and at the time of the visit was 87%, although low in motor vehicle engineering. The vast majority of minority ethnic learners achieve in line with national averages and where this is not the case, for example for learners aged 16 to 18 from Black African and adults from Pakistani backgrounds, numbers are very small. Females and males have similar success rates. The college has scaled down its information technology provision at learning centres substantially to one based at the Stevenage site. Six-weekly reviews of learner progress are undertaken across the college and where issues are highlighted more timely support is offered. Close monitoring of programmes in motor vehicle, information technology, travel and tourism and GCE AS level, led by a member of the senior management team, is underway. The self-assessment report identifies most areas of underperformance.

What progress has been made in improving outcomes in work-based learning and in improving provision for work-related learning for full-time learners?	Reasonable progress
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The success and timely achievement rates for apprenticeships improved each year over the last three years. For 2007/08 the overall success rate for the 33 advanced apprentices is above the national average at 79% and for the 92 apprentices, at 67%, the success rate is around the national average. Timely achievement rates are in line with national averages. Learner numbers on Train to Gain programmes have expanded significantly with over 4,000 starts planned. The college works closely with a range of partners to deliver the provision. The overall success rate in 2007/08 was 75%. Changes to the Entry to Employment programme were introduced last year

and the progress of learners into work and/or education rose to 66% in 2007/08 from 57% in the previous year.

Following the restructuring of work-based learning management in 2007 and the appointment of staff to manage and support the delivery for all apprenticeship and Train to Gain programmes, a greater focus is placed on the needs of employers and learners. New programmes have been introduced in response to the needs of local employers.

What progress has been made in improving key skills achievement?	Reasonable progress
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Since the last monitoring visit, work continues in implementing the strategy and processes to manage key skills throughout the curriculum areas more effectively. The introduction of a centralised computerised tracking and recording system, accessible to both students and staff, provides a more accurate management and target setting tool. With the responsibility for key skills devolved to each department and teaching integrated into the curriculum areas, progress is monitored through regular reporting to senior managers. Where key skills are delivered well, good practice is shared with other curriculum areas. Quality assurance of key skills is effective through internal verification, weekly key skills meetings and the inclusion of key skills in course reviews. The evaluation of data identifies students' progress issues at an early stage and key skills staff receive targeted support from advanced practitioners to improve the provision. Success rates are improving each year but remain low, particularly at level 1 and in information and communication technology. However, analysis of in-year students' progress data indicates further improvement.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in implementing and measuring the impact of the college's learner involvement strategy?	Significant progress
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The college is fully committed to the learner involvement strategy and has made significant progress in implementing and measuring the impact of actions to address learners' concerns and suggestions. An annual appointment of a full-time student president who sits on the governing body and attends key governor committee meetings has been introduced. The post-holder also chairs the Student Union parliament and reports to the board of governors on learners' views. Opportunities for learners to provide feedback have increased, including a student parliament, student conference, governor focus groups and principal's 'question time' meetings.

Successful outcomes include the introduction of drinking water dispensers, gymnasium and outdoor recreational facilities and the 'employability centre' where learners receive support in job search, applications and curriculum vitae development. Where issues are raised, actions are identified and clear and detailed responses are recorded. Learners plan enthusiastically for their future involvement in implementing improvements to college services and speak highly of the college's

responsiveness to their involvement in the process. Curriculum-based and cross-college enrichment activities have expanded significantly over the last three years with high participation rates in 2008/09. Activities to support unemployed learners are planned in a range of curriculum areas across the summer at learners' request.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the effectiveness of curriculum management and in developing a more robust performance management and appraisal system?	Reasonable progress
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More frequent courses reviews inform curriculum and senior managers better, highlighting learners' issues which may impact adversely on attendance and on retention. Through earlier identification of learners at risk of leaving the college, more timely academic and pastoral support is put in place. Online course review proforma are pre-populated with relevant data enabling course leaders to focus better on learners' progress against agreed course targets. Audits undertaken by the quality manager and deputy academy heads indicate a more consistent application of quality processes across sector subject areas. Curriculum managers have a more thorough understanding of learners' progress. Performance management is more rigorous through the revised appraisal process with more focused targets set. More frequent reviews of progress take place where specific improvement targets have been set. Closer monitoring of the completion of the appraisal schedule takes place in liaison between deputy academy heads and human resources staff. Around 40 curriculum and support area managers follow a leadership development programme, closely aligned to college targets, strengthening curriculum management by enabling managers to develop their management practice and performance. Managers value this programme and the opportunities to share management practice highly. Performance across most sector subject areas is improving, although it declined in science and mathematics, engineering, construction and arts in 2007/08, with success rates below national averages in engineering, construction, information technology and the arts. Two thirds of lessons were judged to be good or better in 2007/08, a third successive year's increase.

What progress has been made in addressing the lack of rigour in some self-assessment and quality improvement planning?	Significant progress
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The college has worked with partner colleges and external support to develop its self-assessment and quality improvement planning processes successfully. Beginning each October, four annual updates are completed using information and data generated from course reviews. Self-assessment reports are completed online and pre-populated with appropriate data, as in the case of course reviews. Quality improvement actions generated from course reviews are incorporated within the self-assessment report for each sector subject area more systematically and better inform the college's quality improvement plan. Management information is largely accurate. Self-assessment grading is appropriately focused on outcomes for learners,

teaching and learning observation grades and feedback from learners and employers. Self-assessment judgements are moderated rigorously through external validation panels, attended by partner college and employer representatives. The college plans to sharpen its approach to incorporating learners' views within self-assessment, include learners' representation on validation panels, and to develop support area self-assessment in 2009/10. Judgements made in the self-assessment report are broadly in line with the evidence provided and within sector subject area reports are focused rightly on learners' outcomes and the quality of teaching and learning.