

Dunstable College

Reinspection report

Provider reference	105017
Published date	22/06/09

Audience	Post-sixteen
Published date	22/06/09
Provider reference	130598

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Introduction

Dunstable was inspected in April 2008. Inspectors carried out the inspection under Section 62 of the Learning and Skills Act. The quality of provision was found to be satisfactory or better in all areas inspected, except in information and communication technology (ICT) which was found to be inadequate. Ofsted is responsible for re-inspecting all provision that is inadequate.

The less than satisfactory ICT was re-inspected on 12 and 13 May 2009. The outcomes of the reinspection are as follows.

Curriculum area	Original grade	Reinspection grade
Information and communication technology	4	3

Context

The college offers full-time and part-time courses in ICT from levels 1 to 4. These are available at college and community venues. Qualifications available to learners include national vocational qualifications in information technology (the information technology qualification), first and national diplomas, GCE AS level and other practitioner and user qualifications. Of the 501 learners, 397 are adults, 284 are female, 373 are part-time and 124 are from minority ethnic groups.

Strengths

- high success rates on full-time information technology qualifications and national diploma practitioner courses
- good range of courses to meet learners' needs.

Areas for improvement

- the timeliness of reviews for part-time learners
- under-developed literacy and numeracy support arrangements for part-time information technology qualification learners
- insufficiently specific improvement targets on curriculum area action plans.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Success rates for full-time ITQ and national diploma practitioner courses are significantly above national averages and in line with national averages for other full-time courses. For adults on part-time

courses, success rates have been low in 2006/07 and 2007/08, but college data in 2008/09 for retention and achievement in-year indicate improvement. The standard of learners' work is satisfactory. Part-time learners gain useful ICT skills and full-time learners have well developed practical information technology skills. Learners enjoy their lessons and most contribute actively. Punctuality is good and attendance is satisfactory, except for first diploma learners where it is low.

Quality of provision

The quality of provision and teaching and learning are satisfactory. In the best lessons, questioning is challenging and teachers maintain learners' interest through frequent changes in learning activity. Information learning technology is used particularly effectively. Teaching and learning for part-time learners have improved and are now satisfactory, with a range of taught sessions, workshops and tutorials. Individual learning plans are used appropriately to record progress at monthly reviews and provide short-term learning targets, but too many reviews for part-time learners are overdue. Assessment is satisfactory but comments on some national diploma marked work are insufficient to help learners improve.

The range of provision is good. The college provides a useful range of courses to meet the needs of learners aged 16 to 18 and local adults. Support for learners is satisfactory. Information and advice for most learners are satisfactory, and much improved for part-time learners, but the promotion of literacy and numeracy support is under-developed.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory. Strategies to improve the retention and success rates of part-time learners have been successful and most full-time success rates have improved. A recent restructure of the curriculum area enables more effective management of the ICT provision. Staff communication on full-time courses is good, but is not consistently clear for those based at the learning centre. Resources are satisfactory. Curriculum area action plans cover the main issues of the area, but targets and actions to improve the provision are insufficiently specific. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory.

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Dunstable College

Date of visit: 12–13 May 2009

Context

Dunstable College (the college) is a medium sized general further education college. It is the only college in the new unitary authority of Central Bedfordshire, which came into effect in April 2009. Located in the heart of the town, it operates primarily from this main site and three small sites in Leighton Buzzard, Houghton Regis and Luton.

The college enrolls around 2,600 full-time equivalent learners each year, comprising 1,410 full-time learners and 3,800 on part-time programmes. In 2008/09, 68% were adult learners and 57% were female. Around 24% of learners were from ethnic backgrounds other than White British, significantly higher than the average for South Bedfordshire.

The college offers programmes in 13 of the 15 sector subject areas. The majority of learners are enrolled on programmes in information and communication technology (ICT), preparation for life and work, and business, administration and law. In 2008/09, 78 learners followed work-based learning apprenticeships, 165 Train to Gain programmes and 160 Entry to Employment (E2E) courses.

Previous inspection

The college was last inspected in April 2008 when its effectiveness and capacity to improve were judged to be satisfactory. Achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management were all judged to be satisfactory. Of the sector subject areas inspected, health, public services and care, arts, media and publishing, and preparation for life and work were judged to be good. Hairdressing and beauty therapy, and business, administration and law were judged to be satisfactory, with ICT judged to be inadequate. This is the second of two reinspection monitoring visits, to monitor progress since the previous inspection and to reinspect the inadequate provision.

Achievement and standards

Progress in improving learners' outcomes (by duration, level and age), with a focus on whether the increase in long success rates has been maintained.	Reasonable progress
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In 2007/08, success rates remained at a similar level to 2006/07 and below the national average. Whilst success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 improved this was at a lower rate than nationally. At level 2 success rates improved to around the national average, but at level 3 they remained low, largely due to low success rates on most GCE AS and A level courses. Success rates for adults fell very slightly in 2007/08 and are well below the national average, exacerbated by the poor performance of adult ICT courses at level 2. At levels 1 and 3, success rates for adults are broadly in line with national averages.

College data for 2008/09 indicate improvements in retention when compared with a similar period in the previous year at all levels, significantly so at levels 2 and 3 for learners aged 16 to 18 and for adults at levels 1 and 2. Retention has improved across most sector subject areas, including for adult learners on ICT courses. Actions to improve retention have focused successfully on ensuring learners are on appropriate level courses, more regular monitoring of course level data and more timely interventions to secure improvements. It is too early to comment on the effectiveness of college strategies to improve success rates overall. Attendance remains at a similar level to 2007/08 at 82%.

Progress in improving the low success rates and key skills success rates in some sector subject areas.	Reasonable progress
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The college recognises that performance on GCE A level courses was poor in 2007/08 with success rates falling to a low level. College data indicates improved retention across most GCE AS and A level courses in 2008/09. Retention on AS English, English literature, computing and photography are, however, low as were pass rates in the January examinations in accounting, biology, mathematics and psychology. Investment in management and the quality of teaching and learning has been strengthened and learners' progress is monitored more regularly. The college recognises that further work is required to support students more effectively through the tutorial process. In construction, better information and guidance for learners ensure they are enrolled on appropriate level courses. Target setting for learners in brickwork has improved and is seen as a model of good practice. In sport, retention has improved, significantly so on most courses. A review of the sports curriculum has resulted in provision which better suits the needs of learners. In health and care, staffing difficulties had a negative impact on success rates in 2007/08. The college reports improvement in the current year, with high retention on most courses and the cessation of a two-year evening, access course which had poor retention.

Through more frequent meetings with course team leaders, managers are better able to review learner progress and enable more timely improvement strategies to be initiated.

In key skills, college test results indicate improvement when compared with 2007/08. However, the college recognises completions of learners' portfolios need to be secured to meet the college's success rate target of 50%. The use of key skills advocates in areas such as art and construction have been successful in raising the profile of key skills and in supporting staff in teaching, learning and assessment. From September 2009, responsibility for key skills, and the specialist staff, will be devolved from a central unit to the departments, to enable better integration of key skills within courses and to foster a stronger commitment to the improvement of success rates. Some trialling of functional skills will take place from September.

Quality of provision

Progress in improving the quality of teaching and learning and the proportion of staff who are fully qualified.	Reasonable progress
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The college prioritised observations around increasing the proportion of part-time teachers in its sample in 2008/09. The proportion of sessions judged to be good or better improved slightly to 69%, with further observations to be included in the analysis. All permanent staff are observed annually. The observation process has been expanded to include both group and individual tutorials and peer observations were also introduced to broaden teachers' experiences. Moderations of graded observations have been more consistent in the current year. The college is focusing, rightly, on improving the proportion of lessons judged to be good and is supporting those already judged to be outstanding through joint activities with partner colleges.

A college-wide review has better aligned appraisal processes with teaching observations and resultant development needs, including a closer fit of staff development activities around strategic priorities. Resources to aid staff in their use and development of the virtual learning environment (Moodle) have been produced through the college's 'skill up' staff development project work, with a relaunch of the Moodle site planned for September 2009 to encourage greater participation in its use. Good practice in the use of information learning technology exists on some courses, but learners report it is not yet used widely. College data show 84% of teachers fully qualified or working towards full qualification, of which 95% of full-time staff, are either fully qualified or working towards qualification.

Progress to improve inconsistencies in tutorial arrangements for full- and part-time learners and the arrangements for supporting and sharing good practice.	Reasonable progress
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Inspection identified group tutorial practice as a key strength. The college is addressing the area for improvement identified of insufficient arrangements for supporting and sharing good tutorial practice by focusing on providing increased staff development opportunities on tutorial practice and on target setting for learners through their individual learning plans. More frequent opportunities to share good tutorial practice between teams are promoted. Through quality assurance arrangements, the focus on monitoring the effectiveness of course reviews includes a more systematic review of the quality of individual learning plans and target setting for learners, by heads of department and the quality manager. In 2008/09, a pilot programme of ungraded tutorial observations has taken place with appropriate recording of key strengths, areas for improvement, good practice to be shared with colleagues and a clear focus on learners' development. Most learners receive regular tutorials which they value and find particularly helpful when reviewing short and longer term targets. Learners reported different approaches to the recording of agreed targets. Some learners have their own records of discussions and targets while others do not. Learners are, however, clear on how well they are progressing to achieve their qualifications.

Progress to improve support for full-time learners at college centres other than the main site.	Reasonable progress
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In its self-assessment, the college identified that provision for support services at centres other than the main site was insufficient, particularly at the Kingsland site where around a third of the learners are based. A learner services centre was opened at the Kingsland site in September 2008, providing facilities for learners to access advice, guidance and support. Around 40% of learner support assistant hours are delivered at Kingsland, an increase on the previous year, through a mix of in-class, individual and small group sessions. The service is responsive to learners who wish to access support during their course. Just under 10% of support hours are delivered at the college's other sites in Luton and Leighton Buzzard.

Observations of tutors providing support take place as part of the college's teaching observation system. Good links exist with outside agencies to provide and improve specialist support and advisory services. A cross-college group has been set up recently to better inform future decision-making on support services. An annual review of the impact of the introduction of the new learner services centre is underway.