

# Norton Radstock College

## Focused monitoring visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 130559

**Name of lead inspector:** Neil Edwards HMI

**Last day of inspection:** 31 May 2012

**Type of provider:** General Further Education College

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## **Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings**

### **Context and focus of visit**

Norton Radstock College is a small general further education college based in Radstock, Somerset, with outreach provision offered in centres in the surrounding area. The college provides vocational programmes in all 15 subject areas. The largest of these are health and social care and preparation for life and work. Apprenticeships are offered in six subject areas. The college works with schools and training providers to broaden vocational opportunities for learners aged 14 to 16 and offers foundation degrees and access to higher education courses. Approximately 5% of all learners are from a minority ethnic background. Despite several local neighbourhood areas classed as affluent, the college draws a significant number of learners from areas of high deprivation. Many learners enter the college with low prior attainment; therefore, a high proportion of the college's work is at foundation and intermediate level. Ofsted inspected the college in March 2010 judging overall effectiveness as satisfactory and capacity to improve as good. The college is currently rebuilding part of its main site with completion due in July 2013.

### **Themes**

#### **Self-assessment and improvement planning**

**What progress has the college made in improving self-assessment, action planning and sharing of best practices particularly at curriculum level?**

**Reasonable progress**

Self-assessment has improved since the last inspection, although the college recognises the need to make further refinements to ensure better participation by all staff in the process, and more effective quality improvement planning. Managers have strengthened lesson observations during the last two years, and taken appropriate actions to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The restructuring of senior curriculum posts has increased accountability, and improved internal communications. Senior college managers review systematically the progress made by departments in improving quality and meeting their key performance targets. Senior curriculum leaders have fortnightly meetings with the Principal to discuss progress across a range of the provision and quarterly performance reviews to identify those students who are at risk of underperforming or dropping out of college. These meetings, in particular, have created more opportunities for sharing of best practices across the curriculum areas. The self-assessment process leads to effective action planning, although the report remains overly complex, lengthy and excessively descriptive.

#### **Outcomes for learners**

**What progress has the college made in improving outcomes for learners, in particular for those aged 19 and over on long foundation-level courses?**

**Reasonable progress**

Improving retention rates, particularly for students aged 19 and over on long foundation-level courses, was a key priority for the senior management team following inspection. Stronger focus on retaining learners on these programmes has contributed to improved in-year retention rates, which, at 86%, are seven percentage points higher than the same time last year. Achievement rates on these courses have been generally high over the last two years. Changes to the length of courses, better initial advice and guidance, and more effective use of the college engagement officer to follow up and support learners who have disengaged, have all had a positive impact on retention. Senior curriculum staff have improved their use of data to enhance the monitoring of learners' progress. The college recognises that more needs to be done to continuously improve retention across the provision, and has recently introduced an improved range of courses at foundation level to suit the needs of learners better, particularly for those with learning difficulties. Success rates for all long courses have improved slightly over the last three years but remain marginally below the national rate.

**What progress has the college made in introducing effective measures to improve work-based learning success rates?** **Reasonable progress**

The recently appointed apprenticeship coordinator has introduced rigorous monitoring of learners' progress. Improved initial assessment has ensured all learners are recruited onto appropriate courses. Arrangements to ensure that learners can meet all framework requirements have also improved and staff are now fully aware of learners' progress in every component of their course. A simple colour-coded system quickly alerts staff and learners of actions due or deadlines missed, resulting in more reliable records and regular progress reviews.

Although the college has been slow to recognise the importance of key skills in achieving an apprenticeship, resulting in a significant variation between National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and framework achievements in 2010/11, this situation has improved significantly. Since September 2011 a specialist tutor teaches functional skills to all newly recruited apprentices. Training for vocational staff has enabled them to integrate literacy and numeracy skills better into the programme. Learners approaching the end of their courses receive intensive support to ensure they complete their key skills. Apprenticeship success rates for 2010/11 were below national rates but are rising in the current year. Success rates on Train to Gain programmes are rising steadily and are high.

**Quality of provision**

**What progress has the college made in raising standards of lesson planning, particularly in health and social care, and engineering?** **Reasonable progress**

The college has developed good systems to identify particularly effective teachers across subject areas and to share their expertise with others. Consultant-led workshops have improved teaching practices in engineering. Investment in computer technology has enhanced learners' experiences. Engineering learners make good use of new simulation software to develop knowledge and skills, working independently to relate theory to realistic situations. Health and social care managers have increased the number of computers available and developed the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) to enrich lessons and support independent learning. However, the college recognises that it needs to do more to promote the VLE across all curriculum areas.

The college has introduced a revised lesson plan format, more focused on learning, but staff do not use this consistently. Lesson plans show clearly how less able learners are supported, but rarely include extension activities for more able learners.

**What progress have teachers made in ensuring that they make effective use of tutorials to set and review individual targets with learners?**

**Reasonable progress**

The college has made good progress in developing more learner-centred approaches to target setting. Teachers from the early years and hairdressing areas, who received specialist training in coaching, are leading this initiative. This is beginning to show an impact in improved target setting on learning plans, particularly in those subjects. Learners attend reviews at least once a term, and more frequently if they need to. They find reviews encouraging and helpful in focusing on their learning goals.

However, the college recognises that managers cannot easily gain an overview of how learners are progressing against their targets and continues to seek an effective electronic system to do this, following an unsuccessful pilot.

**What progress has the college made in ensuring engineering staff promote equality and diversity effectively to learners on work-based learning programmes?**

**Reasonable progress**

Following the 2010 inspection, staff devised a comprehensive list of equality and diversity questions to use in learner reviews. In spring 2012, the college audited how well and how often assessors used these, and the quality of recorded responses. This identified a number of areas of good practice, but also some inconsistencies. The use of a newly-introduced tracking spreadsheet ensures that all assessors now ask questions and record the replies. Employment rights and responsibilities are included in all frameworks to test apprentices' knowledge of legislation and procedure. Standardisation meetings include opportunities to share good practice in developing knowledge and understanding about equality and diversity. Staff are developing a wider range of teaching materials and case studies, to promote contextualised understanding of equality and diversity during reviews.

## Leadership and management

**What progress has the college made in improving observations of teaching and learning to identify and share good practices across the provision?**

**Reasonable progress**

New procedures for observations of teaching and learning introduced in September 2010 include clearer documentation and better cross-college moderation. The use of an external consultant to carry out joint lesson observations, and staff from a regional group of colleges to check quality, has proved beneficial. Staff record observations in more detail although, in some cases, there is insufficient focus on learning. Senior managers have made intelligent use of perceptions from learners' surveys and other sources to focus observations on identifying training and development needs. Over the last year, 2010/11, the college carried out more observations to improve recognition of good practices. This included the use of themed observations, for example, to identify best practice in the use of classroom resources and information and learning technology. The proportion of good or better teachers identified through the observation processes has risen significantly. The college makes effective use of staff identified as outstanding teachers to disseminate good practice at college training events, and to mentor new staff.

The college has taken appropriate steps to address poor performance in lessons. Inadequate lessons are re-observed quickly, although guidance notes are insufficiently clear about the process for support, timescales involved and steps taken to rectify underperformance.

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