

Darlington College

First re-inspection monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 130656

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Last day of inspection: 13 May 2015

Type of provider: General further education college

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This is the first re-inspection monitoring visit to Darlington College following publication of the inspection report in March 2015, which found the college to be inadequate overall.

Themes

Improve outcomes for all learners but particularly for 16-18 year old learners and all apprentices.

The college now tracks retention across all college programmes more frequently. The rate is slightly higher for adults than for 16-18-year-olds and overall is currently at 94%. The college's in-year data is also indicating an overall improvement in main qualification success rates.

Apprenticeship success rates for the current year already show some improvement in overall success rates. This could improve further as some apprentices have still to complete their programmes. The maximum possible success rate for all apprentices is much higher than the rate achieved last year.

Managers now make good use of a well-devised curriculum quality framework at termly 'Quality Improvement Review Board' meetings. Staff are now making good use of the monthly 'data dashboard' to measure their performance against the main key performance indicators. Course tutors now take greater accountability for, and have a greater understanding of, management information of their courses.

Priorities for improvement

- Ensure that all programmes carry out a rigorous recruitment process so that they place all learners on the right course and at the right level to meet their future aspirations.
- Carefully monitor the progress all learners are making towards achieving their main qualification to ensure that more learners successfully achieve their main learning aim.
- Ensure that all staff are vigilant in identifying learners who are in danger of dropping out or not succeeding within the expected timescales so that they can put in place relevant interventions to support the learners effectively.

Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The college senior management team has put teaching, learning and assessment at the heart of its post-inspection action plan. The team has begun a review and update of policies and procedures relating to teaching, learning and assessment.

Amendments to the timescales for teachers assessed as requiring additional support through the observation of teaching and learning (OTL) system have already been put in place. There are now closer links between the outcomes of the OTL system and performance management. Themed learning walks involving short observations of teaching staff have been undertaken. Continuing professional development (CPD) has been put in place for tutors without a level 2 qualification in English and mathematics. The college has recently appointed English and mathematics specialists including a level 5 literacy specialist. Planned CPD in the summer term has a clear focus on addressing issues in the post-inspection action plan.

Priorities for improvement

- Update all policies and procedures relating to TLA so that the college will have a bench mark from which to manage and inform staff about the OTL system and assessment process, performance management and continuing professional development.
- Inform and facilitate the training needed to embed the above systems. Ensure that the outcomes of the OTL system are timely and followed through.
- Ensure that the planned CPD meets the key objectives of the revised policies and procedures in order that they can measure the impact of the CPD.

The management of study programmes including the delivery of English and mathematics

College managers have thoroughly reviewed the teaching of English and mathematics in study programmes. As a result they have created a new team and appointed several well-qualified staff on permanent contracts. Curriculum managers have also undertaken a thorough review of curriculum planning for September 2015. As a result there are plans to implement improvements to information, advice and guidance, induction, work placement, progress monitoring and recording. Arrangements for September are still under review but planning is underway.

Priorities for improvement

- Implement the range of new activities and procedures related to information, advice and guidance, induction, risk management and data dashboards so that study programmes meets the individual needs of learners better.

- Review the procedures for the management of learners who achieve grades E and D in English and/or mathematics at GCSE.
- Develop the independent learning aspects of study programmes, including e-learning and so that learners are better equipped for further study.
- Develop individual learning plans so that they identify individual learning needs and are used to monitor and record progress more effectively.
- Continue to develop and more effectively use the pro-monitor systems for the recording and monitoring of learner progress.

Improve the management of the apprenticeship provision so that the overall and timely success rates improve

The college senior management team undertook a 'back to basics' review of the apprenticeship provision in January 2014. Utilising the key stages in the learner journey as a starting point, staff identified clearer roles and responsibilities identifying exactly who was responsible for each aspect of the programme. The 'Apprenticeship Handbook' that resulted from this process clearly illustrates the roles and responsibilities for assessors, verifiers, framework leaders, curriculum managers and the functional skills manager. All relevant staff took part in professional development events. Staff recognised that, previously, learners were not recruited appropriately. A significant number were placed on incorrect programme frameworks, or on programme frameworks at the wrong level based on their prior achievement and with employers who were not always able to offer the full range of activity to meet the framework requirements.

The college has amended its whole recruitment and employer engagement process and now incorporates a 'suitability' report to ensure that apprentices are on the right programme at the right level to meet their needs, and with a suitable employer.

Priorities for improvement

- Revise the management structure for the apprenticeship provision to ensure that roles, responsibilities and general oversight of the provision are clear to all involved.
- Ensure that the recruitment of all apprentices is rigorous and places learners on suitable programmes at the correct level.
- Revise the employer engagement process to make sure that they are able to deliver all aspects of the apprenticeship framework before recruiting or allocating an apprentice to them.
- Ensure that the tracking of progress of all apprentices in all aspects of their framework requirements is rigorous and timely, so that both the overall and timely success rates improve.

Improve the organisation of work experience for all learners on study programmes and improve the tracking and recording of learner destinations more accurately

Two business development advisors now have overall responsibility for finding work-experience opportunities for learners on study programmes. They make good use of their experience in developing links and working relationships with employers to increase the number of placements and other work-experience opportunities. The college has amended its pre-enrolment 'taster' activities, which now run over two days. In addition, the college is redesigning its website to better promote all aspects of study programmes to potential learners.

The college is starting to recognise and identify the individual barriers learners face that may prevent them accessing work-experience activities. This information will help to identify appropriate interventions that can be put in place earlier.

College staff have started to develop and put in place more rigorous systems to track learners' intended career goal or destination. They recognise that they gather too much 'intended' destination and that they need to continue to develop systems to ensure they capture accurate actual destinations.

Priorities for improvement

- Ensure that sufficient resources such as staff, books and information technology are available to enable all relevant learners to access a work experience placement during their study programme.
- Develop an overall strategy to implement work experience in order to capture the full range of potential opportunities as well as roles and responsibilities for all involved in the process.
- Create a workplace and employability task group to monitor and oversee the development of employability skills generally and in particular the work-experience activities.
- Continue to develop the systems for communication, especially with employers and the learners.
- Further develop the understanding of potential barriers for learners accessing work experience and develop a range of contingency plans in addition to reviewing feedback from learners and employers.

Improve governance arrangements for all aspects of the colleges' work

Following the inspection the college has moved quickly to respond to concerns about governance. The Chair of the Board has stepped down but has remained as a board member to give some continuity. The chair of the audit committee, who has agreed to chair board meetings, has replaced him but he will not take on the role of Chair of the Board in the long-term. An appropriately qualified new governor has replaced the chair of the audit committee and they have appointed a new governor as vice chair of the board.

The board now meets monthly and they have incorporated the quality and standards committee into the smaller board to allow for greater scrutiny of reports. The minutes show that there has been rigorous scrutiny of the post-inspection report and appropriate actions taken. The interim chair reports that there is good communication with the Principal and senior management team.

The college recognises that they need to strengthen the board by having appropriate expertise, for example, in the understanding of the further education sector. The search committee is aware of the urgency needed to make these appointments and is being proactive in pursuing a wide range of potential new governors. There will be a governors' conference for two days in June. The Association of Colleges will facilitate this and its purpose is to review existing arrangements for the board and reposition it for the coming year.

Priorities for improvement

- Appoint a new Chair of the Board.
- Reduce the size of the board to enable all governors to participate fully.
- Increase the number of governors who have relevant experience in further education.
- Continue to develop the new data dashboard so that governors can interrogate data more effectively.
- Develop the governors' relationship with curriculum areas through a programme of meetings and visits.
- Establish a process designed to create a clear, direct link between governors and members of the senior management team so that they can each communicate, support and challenge each other.

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