

# Darlington College

## Follow up re-inspection monitoring visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 130656

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**Type of provider:** General further education college

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## **Monitoring visit: main findings**

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

This is the first follow-up re-inspection monitoring visit to Darlington College following publication of the inspection report on 20 March 2015, which found the provider to be inadequate overall. During the visit, inspectors focused on the main themes agreed at the first monitoring visit. This inspection took place after the students' term had ended. Inspectors were not able to speak directly to learners, however, they were able to view in year progress data, view the extensive range of materials produced for use with learners in September and meet with a wide range of tutors and managers.

### **Themes**

#### **Improve the outcomes for all learners but particularly for 16–18-year-old learners**

Since the last inspection, the college has delivered a significant amount of staff training, placing a particular emphasis on supporting the implementation of study programmes for 16–18-year-old learners. The focus of this training is to ensure that staff incorporate fully all the key components of the programme into the learners' experience without losing sight of the main vocational qualification. For example the recently produced handbooks for staff and learners are exemplary.

Senior managers have also implemented successful and significant changes to the leadership of underperforming curriculum areas. A significant number of general staff changes have also taken place at all levels throughout the college, enabling managers to recruit stronger staff into teaching positions. Recent college assessment data suggest that success rates for 16–18-year-olds will improve this year when compared with 2013/14. The predicted success rates show that learners who were identified as at risk of leaving their courses have been given additional support and have been retained to successfully complete their programme. Adult success rates remain strong.

Managers' tracking of progress on vocational courses shows that where marks and grades have been finalised for 2014/15, success rates are above the previous year's national averages. However, although the college is taking robust action to improve outcomes for all current learners, these will not impact fully until later in the year.

#### **Reasonable improvement for learners**

## **Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment**

The college's 'quality-task-and-finish' group, which represents all sector subject areas, is working effectively to put refreshed policies and documentation online. Changes to the observation of teaching and learning procedures have been presented to the executive committee for approval. Revised documentation explains the purpose of the system and very clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of both tutors and observers. Proposals recommend that observations be scheduled on a risk-assessment basis. Observers and managers now align the outcomes of observations more closely to capability measures and the performance management of staff.

The group is considering new measures for rewarding teachers with outstanding performance and the use of mentors and learning coaches. Some observers have completed training as part of their continuing professional development and more training is planned over the summer for observers. The team of observers intends to conduct an inspection in the autumn term of areas that were not part of the February inspection in order to evaluate performance in these areas.

Actions the college is taking appear appropriate and rigorous in their aim to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment for all learners. However, it is too early to judge the full impact of these actions as most learners have completed their programmes for 2014/15.

**As the monitoring visit took place after the end of term, progress judgments on this theme will be made following the next monitoring visit**

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

A thorough review of English and mathematics provision across the college has been undertaken. The resulting action plan is thorough and robust. Staff have completed training on the use of systems to improve initial assessment that takes place in the autumn term. Staff have improved the quality of resources both in the learning centre and in classrooms. Managers have scheduled regular continuing professional development activities to cover behaviour management and new ways of working. The English and mathematics team is fully aware of the need to integrate its work across the college and will focus on this through the continuing professional development week in July. The team still needs to do some development work in modelling exactly how it will track and record students' progress using the group profile and the college management information systems.

The college's information technology (IT) task-and-finish group members are working well to achieve their goal of eradicating spreadsheets and recording data in the most effective and efficient ways. They have created a course performance report (CPR), which automatically produces monthly data at three levels: individual,

course and whole college. Curriculum managers told inspectors that they find this level of reporting very helpful in monitoring students' progress. Inspectors found managers to be more knowledgeable and confident in their analysis and use of data, including reporting up to the Board of governors. Technical staff are very responsive to tutors' requests to make systems fit for purpose and focus on improving support for students.

The college management information developments include automated data imports, logging achievements on entry, automatic red/amber/green rating for attendance under 90%, installing 'student badges' for good attendance and behaviour. The full impact of this work will be seen in the coming year. Managers plan additional training to ensure all staff are confident in their use of the college management information. Progression coaches are able to show to inspectors how their use of Pro-monitor has improved the monitoring and tracking of learners' progress. Inspectors looked at specific case studies that demonstrated how additional support for vulnerable learners enabled them to complete their studies successfully. Overall retention in 2014/15 has increased to 94.8%. Retention for 16-18 year olds has improved to 90.3%. After some initial resistance, tutors now value highly the work of progression coaches and they have had a significant impact in supporting students to complete their programmes successfully.

### **Reasonable improvement for learners**

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

Following the detailed review of management, roles and responsibilities for staff involved in delivering the apprenticeship programme in 2014, senior managers have re-allocated the management and control of the provision to curriculum managers. Prospective employers now undergo a skills scan before the college places an apprentice with them in order to ensure that they can offer the full range of skills needed to deliver the full apprenticeship framework.

Communication between curriculum areas is good and managers share examples of good practice. Progress tracking systems and data dashboards are detailed and monitor well apprentices' progress in all aspects of the apprenticeship framework requirements.

Managers are currently updating the previous staff handbook for the apprenticeship programmes to reflect recent changes in management control and revised quality systems. The relationships with employers are improving significantly. The college is successfully engaging with new employers who are keen to offer an apprenticeship opportunity to learners.

The college's analysis of performance for the current year, 2014/15, using a very conservative approach, indicates an improvement in the overall success rate for 16–

18-year-old apprentices to 57% compared to a national rate of 56%. Inspectors will review and evaluate the data further at the next visit to the college.

### **Reasonable improvement for learners**

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

At the time of the last inspection, plans for work experience were in place; however, staff had not yet implemented them. The college has stopped using an external agency to organise work experience and has employed two dedicated business development advisors to organise the work experience for all learners. This is now making a significant impact on delivering a more coherent work experience strategy. In the current year, 2014/15, three quarters of the student cohort had a planned work experience as part of their programme of whom 72%, completed their placement. The remaining learners completed relevant, alternative activities.

The response from employers has also been significantly more positive. A large proportion of employers have already requested more placement learners in the coming year. Some have also offered placement learners part-time and weekend work and others have offered learners apprenticeship opportunities.

Systems to improve the accuracy of the tracking and recording of learner destinations continue to be developed. Staff now have a clear understanding of internal progression between course levels and record this accurately. Staff apply more rigorous criteria to ensure that the learners meet the course entry requirements. They also ensure that learners have demonstrated the required behaviours and attitudes to support their progression to that higher level.

### **Reasonable improvement for learners**

#### **Improve governance arrangements for all aspects of the college's work**

Senior managers and board members are moving quickly to resolve issues around governance through their monthly meetings. Reporting to the Board is now more robust. Data is presented in clearer formats and governors are holding managers to account more effectively. They have taken effective steps to reduce the size of the Board; several board members have stepped down, including the Chair. The college has appointed a new governor to strengthen the financial expertise on the Board. It has also identified a new Chair and a governor with significant experience of further education, but cannot yet confirm their appointments. The Association of Colleges provided two days of training for governors. There was good attendance at the training and a high degree of agreement as to future expectations and actions.

Governors discussed the structure of the Board and its committees and agreed that they should reinstate the quality and standards committee as soon as possible. The Board is reviewing links with curriculum areas and exploring how it might develop an assurance role reporting to the Board using thematic lines of enquiry – for example, English and mathematics, student voice, high needs students, financial recovery and safeguarding. This review has yet to be completed and it is too early to judge its impact.

### **Reasonable improvement for learners**

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