

# Darlington College

Re-inspection monitoring visit report

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**Name of lead inspector:** Tim Gardner, Her Majesty's Inspector

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## Monitoring visit: main findings

### Context and focus of visit

This is the third follow-up re-inspection monitoring visit to Darlington College following publication of the inspection report on 20 March 2015 that found the college to be inadequate overall.

At the last monitoring visit, inspectors placed a greater priority on reviewing the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Inspectors agreed with the Principal and deputy principal of the college that the focus of this visit would be on the impact of the changes made against the key themes initially identified.

### Themes

**Improve the outcomes for all learners, particularly for the 16–18-year-old learners and all apprentices**

**Reasonable progress**

At the last inspection, inspectors judged that not enough 16–18-year-old learners successfully achieved their main vocational qualification. Previous re-inspection visits reviewed college interim data for 2014/15 and judged that the college was making reasonable progress. At this visit, senior managers were able to provide final data for 2014/15 as well as progress data for the current year, 2015/16.

In 2014/15, both the overall success rate and the achievement rate for the main vocational qualification for 16–18-year-old learners improved by 3% to 86% and 95% respectively. The vast majority of subject area success rates are now at least in line with, or better than, the last available national figures. Success rates for the long, substantial qualifications at both level 2 and level 3 also improved significantly.

Success rates for 16–18-year-olds on qualification types in 2014/15 are all either at, or above, the most recent national figures. The overall success rate for adult learners on nearly all programmes remains high.

Apprenticeship overall success rates improved in 2014/15 and success within the planned time for 16–18-year-olds improved substantially from 51% to 65%. The more rigorous application of entry criteria, as reported at previous visits, has had a significant impact, particularly for the college's direct delivery programmes. Retention and attendance rates have both improved. Managers now use detailed management information 'dashboards' that provide a wide range of detailed information showing attendance rates, particularly at English and mathematics sessions, and apprentices' progress.

However, GCSE success rates for both mathematics and English remained low for 2014/15. GCSE mathematics success rates are better than those for English and are in line with the national figure for 16–18-year-olds and above the national figure for learners over 19 years old. Not enough 16–18-year-old learners are achieving a high

grade in GCSEs, although the proportion achieving a high grade in mathematics is in line with the low national figure. The proportion of adult learners achieving a high grade is better and is now above the national figure. A large majority of the current GCSE English learners have already successfully completed five of the eight required controlled assessments; this indicates that learners are making more rapid progress this year.

College managers recognise that success rates for functional skills for study programme learners remain too low. Managers have introduced a significant number of developments and changes to the delivery and management of the functional skills provision. The observation of teaching process now reports on the inclusion and promotion of mathematics and English skills in vocational teaching; observation reports indicate that this is increasing significantly. In the current year to date, around two thirds of learners have successfully completed the speaking and listening element of their functional skills English, and the remaining learners have all completed one or other element.

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

### **Reasonable progress**

The significant improvements made to the observation of teaching, learning and assessment scheme since the last inspection are resulting in swift identification and support for underperforming teachers. The scheme now closely aligns with the performance management of staff. Observations show that in 2015/16 standards improved because of this support. Many staff previously graded as inadequate have now left the college. During this monitoring visit, it was not possible to undertake extensive classroom observations. A learning walk in vocational areas demonstrated good skills development, attendance and behaviour.

Teaching coaches are well established, skilled and approachable. Staff have confidence in them and use them well to provide support following observations. When delivering continuing professional development, the coaches successfully model the behaviours they are promoting in the classroom, such as pace in lessons and classroom management. Managers now evaluate the impact of this training and they are already seeing the positive results of activities on improved achievement, retention, attendance and punctuality.

Key to these improvements is the work of progression coaches and their close links with subject tutors. Their interventions in supporting learners to be ready to learn are significantly supporting improvements. The progression coaches were able to show inspectors many case studies of how their work enabled learners to stay on programme and to succeed in achieving their qualifications. Senior managers acknowledge that the use of progression coaches in all curriculum areas is not yet fully developed, and that in some areas there is more work to do in supporting staff in their use of recording of attendance.

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

The college has made significant changes to the management of study programmes since the last inspection. Previous visit reports have included reference to many of these. The more rigorous application of entry criteria and information, advice and guidance pre-entry, as well as good use of the college's 'course confirmation' period have paid dividends. Retention rates have improved compared with the same time last year. Attendance rates have improved significantly. Learners and staff recognise the study programme as being more worthwhile and a stronger single entity. The planning and delivery of the employability aspects of the programme, including work placements, have improved. The college recognises that this is still challenging for some areas such as information technology, but staff are working to develop alternative activities to meet these learners' needs.

As reported at the last visit, the arrangements for teaching English and mathematics have greatly improved. As stated earlier, college managers recognise that success rates for English and mathematics still need further improvement but the changes they have put in place are having a positive impact. Success rates are improving and learners complete elements of the qualification earlier in the year rather than leaving them all until the end of the year.

## **Improve the management of apprenticeship provision so that the overall and success within the planned time rates improve**      **Reasonable progress**

The changes that the senior management have made to the management structure of apprenticeship provision and the devolvement of responsibilities back to curriculum areas, as reported at previous visits, are now more established. Curriculum managers allocate responsibility to framework leaders. Regular meetings between all the framework leaders and assessors across the college effectively share knowledge and good practice. The overall success rates for all apprentices improved slightly in 2014/15 to 66%. However, this still requires improvement. Success rates within the planned time improved significantly for 16–18-year-old apprentices by 14% and this is now above the previous national level. The rate remains low for other age groups. In the current year, the success rate for apprentices is already at the same rate as for the whole of last year and a significant number of apprentices remain on programme. The college's monitoring system indicates that a large majority of these are on schedule to complete on time.

The college is still working with a number of subcontractors who deliver apprenticeship provision as part of the college's funding contract. Senior managers at the college now take a much stronger approach in managing these subcontractors to ensure that they provide a better-quality service to the apprentices they support on behalf of the college.

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

The energy and enthusiasm that business development advisers bring to their work have significantly improved the organisation and management of work experience activities. They continue to build successful links with existing and new businesses and employers to broaden opportunities and increase the number of placements.

Structural changes and whole-college continuing professional development events in July 2015 ensured that all staff heard the same messages. Senior managers successfully signalled to staff their high expectations in relation to the requirements of the study programme and work experience.

The advisers carefully monitor and plan well the work placement programme. More learners are in external placements. Where possible they match learners' interests to placements. Tutors develop employability skills well in tutorials and teaching sessions. Tutors give careful thought to developing employability skills and preparation for work experience, particularly for level 1 learners. The whole approach to work placement by the college has changed and now demonstrates innovation; for example, in using pop-up shops in a local shopping centre and approaching employers for real-time projects that learners undertake while on placement. A well-designed work experience workbook is effective in recording activities and outcomes from placements. Learners use this workbook well to inform assignment briefs and classroom discussions.

Since the last inspection, managers have put a huge amount of effort and energy into collecting and analysing destination data. The resulting report for 2014/15 is rich in data and managers use this well to inform curriculum planning and to ensure that information, advice and guidance place learners on the right course. The dedicated administration team now tracks and records learner destinations very successfully; they know the destinations of 83% of learners; 59% have progressed to further training; 23% into work or apprenticeships; and 12% into higher education. Managers are using the improved data collection around employment linked to vocational study to modify the curriculum and update information, advice and guidance to learners well.

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

The way in which the board now conducts its business and rigorously holds senior leaders to account is a significant improvement since the last inspection. The new chair of the board of governors took over from the outgoing chair in November 2015. His induction to the role was thorough and his meetings with individual curriculum managers enable him to be fully aware of key issues facing the college. In meetings with inspectors, he demonstrated a clear understanding of key issues and identified

the areas of underperformance in the college. Board minutes show well-managed meetings with a high level of discussion and data interrogation.

An audit of governors' skills identified that finding a new governor to represent employers was a priority for the college. A representative from a large local business has now filled this role. Senior managers and board members now make good use of the start of board meetings for training activities. Most recently, this has included safeguarding and training in the 'Prevent' duty for governors.

The board reinstated the quality and standards committee in November 2015 in line with the task and finish group's plan. The committee's minutes show the positive impact that recently appointed board members are making. Governors now provide a good level of challenge to the Principal. On her recent presentation of the latest self-assessment report, board members demonstrated their understanding of key issues facing the further education sector by their rigorous questioning of senior staff.

Using their knowledge of the further education sector and scrutiny of reports, college governors are now requesting specific additional information and briefings to ensure that they are able to interrogate and fully understand areas of underperformance.

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