

Darlington College

Re-inspection monitoring visit report

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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 in March 2015, which found the college to be inadequate overall.

On the last visit, there was no teaching available to observe. Therefore, the primary focus of this monitoring visit was to observe teaching and to talk to students about their experiences on their programmes.

Themes

Improve outcomes for all students but particularly for 16- to 18-year-old students and all apprentices

Reasonable progress

At the last visit, using the colleges' predicted outcomes, inspectors judged outcomes for students were making reasonable progress. On this visit, the college was able to present data that are more reliable. These provide further evidence to support the judgement of reasonable progress.

All programme areas have maintained or improved their success rates for last year for all students, and particularly for the 16- to 18-year-olds. Some have improved considerably, such as the business administration area, where success rates for 16- to 18-year-olds have improved by 20%. In information and communication technologies, they have improved by 17%. In arts, media and publishing, the largest study programme area in the college, success rates for 16- to 18-year-olds have improved very significantly to 94%.

The college recognises that, although improving, the English and mathematics success rates remain low, and below where they would like them to be. The proportion of students achieving an A* to C GCSE pass mark in English and mathematics is improving. The reorganised management of this area is having a significant and positive impact. The college effectively informs students of the importance of functional skill development and the need to continue to improve their skills in both English and mathematics in order to achieve their goals.

Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Reasonable progress

Inspectors completed eight joint observations with members of the college's observation team and less formal observations of all curriculum areas with curriculum managers. Inspectors have confidence in the observation team's judgements. Curriculum managers are highly knowledgeable and effective in their areas. They demonstrated energy and enthusiasm but, perhaps more importantly, a relentless focus on improving students' achievement and the quality of teaching.

Managers and staff have taken effective action to improve the behaviour of students. All lessons observed showed students to be ready to learn and, where appropriate, with the correct personal protective equipment (PPE). Inspectors noted good behaviour in all lessons and around the college. Tutors are focusing on classroom rules and enforcing the wearing of students' identity badges and lanyards at all times. New procedures around lateness are having a positive impact as attendance in lessons is good and students are punctual.

The key strengths observed in teaching, learning and assessment are:

- good examples of the inclusion of literacy and or numeracy in many sessions
- the good positive learning atmosphere in workshops and classrooms
- very good technical knowledge demonstrated by tutors
- the good use by most tutors of directed questioning strategies to check learning and understanding
- the good variety of activities used at the start of sessions to recap on previous learning
- the good behaviour and enthusiastic attitudes to learning demonstrated by students
- very good cooperation between learning support tutors and vocational staff, which has significantly improved students achievement
- the effective peer evaluation of assignments, which helps students to improve the quality of their work and their assignments.

The key weaknesses observed in teaching, learning and assessment are:

- the lack of sufficient pace in a small number of sessions resulting in some students losing interest
- an over-reliance by a few tutors on non-directed questioning, resulting in the more confident students dominating discussion and the tutors' attention
- in a few cases staff do not ensure that learners are given sufficiently challenging targets and this limits the learners' progress.

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

The senior management team has worked tirelessly and very effectively to ensure staff and students have a good understanding of the requirements of study programmes. They have produced very good quality handbooks and have delivered an effective induction programme. As a result, both students and staff now demonstrate a good understanding of the requirements of study programmes. Students are keen to learn and they are enjoying their studies. Staff have a relentless and successful focus on improving students' behaviour, attendance and punctuality. This ensures that students engage well in lessons, settle quickly into their programmes and demonstrate exemplary behaviour. Much improved information and initial advice and guidance and recruitment activities have significantly reduced withdrawal and transfer of students from programmes. Managers and staff closely monitor attendance and punctuality, and both are good.

The arrangements for teaching English and mathematics across the college have greatly improved and are beginning to demonstrate a positive impact on students' achievement. Staff identify students' starting points and learning needs at an early stage and ensure that they receive the support they need. The inclusion of English and mathematics in most vocational areas is much improved. There are many examples of staff using realistic and relevant activities to enhance students' skills in English and mathematics. For example, motor vehicle sessions include an extension activity that requires students to accurately price and invoice for work completed for external clients. Students observed during the visit really understood the importance of improving their English and mathematics skills as part of their study programmes. The college has successfully recruited appropriately qualified staff. This newly created team is beginning to raise students' aspirations and achievement.

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

The last inspection visit judged that the college had made reasonable progress in improving the management of apprenticeship programmes. The emerging data for last year, although there are still some claims outstanding, now demonstrate improved success rates in most areas for apprentices. However, the success rates remain just below both the national rates and the rates for similar providers.

Curriculum managers identify the benefits of moving management and control of the apprenticeship provision back into the curriculum areas. Clearer accountabilities and responsibilities enable managers to monitor and track progress and quality more effectively. Communication between all staff and managers involved in the provision has improved significantly. The identified improvements in overall success have been supported by the successful development and utilisation of a detailed and refined staff handbook, more accurate identification of functional skills needs, delivery of functional skills to apprentices as discrete groups and a more rigorous approach to applying entry requirements.

Improve the organisation of work experience for all students on study programmes and improve the tracking and recording of student destinations more accurately **Reasonable progress**

As reported at the last visit, a high proportion of the students with a planned work experience as part of their study programme successfully completed a good placement with a relevant business or employer. The business development advisers continue to build links with existing and new businesses and employers successfully, to broaden opportunities for placements this academic year. Contributions made at group tutorial sessions are raising student awareness and understanding of the benefits and impact of a successful work experience in developing their employability skills. Improved links and presentations at school Year 11 events contribute to developing greater understanding of study programme content for post-16 provision.

The college continues to develop stronger links between work experience offered and the students' planned destination.

The college has successfully tracked a high proportion of actual destinations for students on study programmes who left last year. A recently established dedicated administration team use refined and improved systems successfully to track and record student destinations.

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

Reasonable progress

The college has completed its search and formally appointed a new Chair of the Board and a governor with extensive experience of further education. The interim Chair of the Board will continue to support and work alongside the new chair until December 2015. The board is smaller and governors now represent a good balance of the skills with which to hold the college to account. Reporting to the board using the data dashboard enables governors to interrogate data and performance more effectively. The task and finish group has done its job well. The Principal intends to complete the reinstatement of the quality and standards committee by December 2015. This is a further positive step to normalising the work of the board.

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