

## ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Northumberland College

Date of visit: 16 January 2007

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit (AAV). It focuses on the themes explored during the visit and does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the college's performance.

### Achievement and standards

What action has been taken to improve success rates on long courses?

- Managers and teachers have taken effective action to improve success rates on long courses. College data for 2006 show that success rates improved at all levels. Success rates at level 1 and level 2 for learners aged 16 to 18 and those aged 19+ are now at or above the 2005 national averages for similar colleges. However, at level 3, whilst success rates show improvement on the previous year, they are still significantly below the 2005 national averages.
- The college is implementing an appropriate range of actions to further improve success rates this academic year. For example, there is increased focus by teachers and managers on identifying and supporting learners who are underachieving and those at risk of dropping out of their course. Additional learning support in lessons is being targeted to meet the needs of individual learners. The increased focus on improving attendance at lessons has been maintained. Course managers are making more effective use of the traffic light system, introduced last year, for monitoring underperforming courses. More accurate data are increasingly being used by course leaders to support the process.
- Subject learning coaches are becoming more established in their roles and have provided training events and coaching sessions which have helped teachers to use a wider range of teaching techniques. Joint training with a local high school has helped teachers to develop teaching and learning strategies suited to learners aged 14 to 16. Other training events, facilitated by external consultants, have been designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the college. More training will take place later in the academic year.

Achievement of apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship frameworks are poor. The college recognises this in its self-assessment report (SAR). At the time of the last AAV a number of actions had been put in place to raise standards. What impact have these had?

- The college has made good progress in implementing actions to raise standards in work-based learning (WBL). Framework achievement has improved overall. In engineering, the achievement rate has more than doubled over the last two years.
- Framework co-ordinators are working closely together, reporting to the WBL manager, to standardise documents and procedures across all areas of learning. Following consultancy, reviews have been revised and target setting is now much clearer. Staff have a better understanding of the demands of the frameworks and learners know more clearly what they need to do to achieve. Key skills and technical certificates are taught earlier in the programme to ensure that learners meet all of the framework requirements rather than leaving with just the national vocational qualification (NVQ). Initial diagnostic testing is conducted, and a member of the essential skills team is assigned to each vocational area. This enables the learning support provided to be linked to the vocational context.
- The college is working more closely with employers, who have a better understanding of the framework requirements and see the value of the wider skills learners are acquiring.
- Resources have improved in some areas. In motor vehicle, an employer has donated two cars for learners to work on. This was matched by the college giving up-to-date equipment for learners to work on. In hair and beauty, the reception area has been improved to provide a more professional environment for learners and clients.

## Leadership and management

What progress has been made in addressing areas for improvement identified at the last inspection?

- During the 2005/06 academic year, the principal, vice principal and director of quality left the college. A new principal took up post at the start of 2006/07. Soon after, the director of finance left. The new principal is supported, on an interim basis, by an acting vice principal on secondment from a partner college and, since November 2006, by a team of consultants providing advice on finance and information systems. In addition three new

governors have been appointed who bring significant experience of further education with them.

- In the short time since the arrival of the new principal, good progress has been made in improving strategic leadership and direction. A review of the college's strategic plan will begin shortly and will involve governors, managers and other staff in developing a new mission, vision and values for the college. The principal has secured funding for consultancy support to produce an accommodation strategy for the Kirkley Hall site and work is continuing on plans for a new build developed in partnership with the local authority and the local learning and skills council. A strategic alliance has been formed with a local college of a similar size to ensure that the college is better able to respond to changing local and national priorities. Governors recently approved the principal's plans for a management restructure.
- The principal has taken effective action to change the management culture in the college to one which engages all staff in decision making and increases levels of accountability. Middle managers appreciate the accessibility of the new senior managers and the opportunities to be involved in developing strategies to improve the college. Improved communications help to ensure that staff are more aware of the financial constraints within which the college is operating. Middle managers and teachers now have a better understanding of their role in improving the performance of the college through a closer focus on improving success rates.
- Good progress has been made in improving access to, and the use of, management information to help to raise standards of performance. New senior managers are providing strong leadership in this area. More accurate data is helping managers to become more effective in their roles. For example, exception reports are now being used effectively to ensure that teachers comply with requests for information on levels of learners' attendance at lessons and withdrawals from courses. Regular training events are being held to ensure that course managers understand how to use software such as Pro-Achieve to accurately monitor retention and achievement. The team providing information services has been relocated onto the college's main site and a management information group, with membership from across the college, has been established. The information services manager plans to roll out the use of electronic registers across the college to facilitate more rapid and accurate attendance monitoring. The college has started to implement plans for using curriculum planning tools to ensure courses are viable.
- Managers have made only limited progress in securing the more consistent application of quality improvement procedures across faculties, largely as a

result of the considerable staff changes over the last year. A review of key policies and procedures is in its early stages. Weaknesses in the college's arrangements for observing teaching and learning have been identified and are beginning to be addressed. In future teachers will be observed annually and evaluations of their lessons will become part of the evidence base for annual appraisal. Planned training for observers is intended to ensure that the observation process is more effective in helping teachers know what they have to do to improve. The draft SAR for 2005/06 has not been through any formal moderation or validation. Governors have asked for this to happen before the final report is approved.

- Some progress has been made in addressing the inconsistent arrangements for sharing and using good practice across the college. Framework co-ordinators have taken effective action to share good practice across WBL programmes. The 14 to 19 curriculum manager has put arrangements in place for joint training and work shadowing with a local high school. However, in other areas of the college arrangements for sharing good practice are underdeveloped.