

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Dearne Valley College
Date of visit: 10 July 2007

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit. 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

A key strength in the recent inspection was 'good improvements in overall long course success rates', however an area for improvement was 'inconsistencies in some success rates, especially for adults'. What strategies has the college put in place to ensure the weaker areas make the same good improvements as other areas and how is progress being monitored?

- Success rates for adults in 2005/06 improved at both levels 2 and 3 but declined at level 1. Adult learners on level 1 courses have a very diverse range of backgrounds and there is a strong emphasis on supporting them back into learning. Many learners do make progress, particularly with developing their skills, but do not achieve a full qualification. The college has analysed provision at level 1 and is adapting courses to ensure they continue to meet learners' needs and support them in achieving a qualification in addition to their skills development. Tracking and assessment mechanisms have improved and early indications suggest more learners will be successful this year.
- Overall the college uses the management information systems very effectively in progress monitoring. The college system, Tracking Retention and Achievement of College Enrolments (TRACE) is used by staff to monitor the progress of all learners and allows data to be analysed in a variety of ways, from whole college level down to an individual learner. This supports staff in identifying areas of underperformance and putting appropriate strategies in place. The tracking of learners from minority ethnic backgrounds shows a marked increase in their success rates this year, with learners on public services courses achieving 100% retention and achievement.

Although improving, the last inspection highlighted success rates for apprentices as an area for improvement. What progress has been made in this area?

- Success rates for apprentices have been very poor. The recent inspection recognised some improvement and college data as at July 2007 indicates further and significant improvement. The college has made substantial efforts to improve its work-based learning apprenticeships through improvements in the delivery of key skills, tracking of learner progress, and co-ordination of the work-based learning unit and curriculum areas.

Quality of education and training

The 'low profile of healthy eating' was an area for improvement in the recent inspection. What actions have been taken by the college to address this issue and how is the impact monitored and assessed?

- There have always been healthy options available in the diners and the college has regularly enhanced the offer. The college now has a very strong focus on raising the profile of healthy lifestyles, looking in particular at healthy eating. There was an annual health week in March and a healthy eating day is currently being planned for September. Other information is available to learners, for example, on the virtual learning environment (VLE), and health message screen savers are being investigated. In addition, healthy eating will be one of the mandatory themes within the tutorial programme. This will support the monitoring of the initiative as will assessing the uptake of healthy options. The college feels the key to success in this area is to educate learners as to the benefits of healthy living by providing them with relevant information and guidance.

The use of information and learning technology (ILT) to enhance learning is described as improving in the recent inspection and the 2005/06 self assessment report (SAR) identifies many positive developments in the use of ILT. However ILT is also part of an area for improvement in the SAR raising standards section. What progress has the college made in ensuring all areas use ILT

effectively and in establishing a minimum level of entitlement for students?

- The college recognises that ILT facilities are not all of a consistent quality across college sites and has secured funding through a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) project to enable further improvement of the IT infrastructure and resources. There is a strong commitment to supporting staff in using ILT effectively within a blended approach to teaching and learning. ILT mentors have been appointed to work with teaching staff in identifying appropriate ILT resources and develop their capability to use ILT effectively. The monitoring and tracking of learner progress has been significantly aided through the development and implementation of in-house software. This is being further developed as a solution to further improving the recording and tracking of learners on NVQ programmes. The college ILT strategy includes many of the elements of a minimum level of entitlement for learners but these have not been drawn together as a discrete entitlement. The use of ILT features on individual lesson observations but there has been little analysis of the overall impact of ILT on observation grades to date.

There were many positive aspects relating to the observations of teaching and learning process in the recent inspection report, but it was also stated that 'the criteria used to inform judgements are not appropriate in all contexts' and the grade profile of lessons seen by inspectors was lower than the college summary. How is the college building on strengths in this area and ensuring all areas are judged using appropriate criteria?

- Since the recent inspection the lesson observation process has been redesigned to give a greater focus on using qualitative evidence-based judgments. As well as a systematic lesson observation scheme the college also has a schedule of mock inspections. The standardisation of observation results is being further improved through the increased use of co-observation. College teaching and learning observation grades as at July 2007 indicate a significant increase in the percentage of lessons judged to be good or better and a reduction in unsatisfactory lessons to zero. The college is strongly committed to providing staff development to continually improve teaching and learning. A newly introduced Standards and Development unit, which includes two learning strategies

managers and five enhanced lecturers, has a key role in raising standards and supporting staff. Staff development is being further developed from September 2007 through a new learning sets initiative, aimed at developing advanced teaching and learning practice and further promoting the sharing of good practice.

A key strength in the recent inspection was 'good response to employer and community needs' and the college has three Centres of Vocational Excellence which provide high quality training. What strategies is the college using to maintain this high level of performance?

- As part of its recent restructuring the college has introduced a Business Services and External Relations directorate which has a clear focus on further developing business and community activity. Services to business have been further enhanced through the Train2Gain and subcontracted European Social Fund co-financed Invest in Skills provision. The college is part of a "Training Pays" pilot aimed at people aged 16-18 who are in employment but without training. Through this programme 3 learners recently successfully achieved a foundation construction award in plastering and are progressing to an intermediate award in plastering. The college provides bespoke training to a range of organisations. In addition it has recently recruited an enterprise co-ordinator to further raise the profile and extend enterprise activity within the college.

The recent inspection judged 'very good personal support for learners' to be a key strength but also identified insufficient monitoring of group tutorials. What procedures has the college put in place to address this?

- From September 2007 all tutorial schemes of work will be quality checked by the learning strategies manager for tutorials. Schemes of work will show how they link to the Every Child Matters (ECM) themes and how these issues will be covered. There will be a centralised record of schemes of work on the VLE, which can be used to disseminate good practice and support new tutors. There will also be a swap shop of expertise so that staff who are skilled in specific areas can share good practice. In addition to these initiatives, tutorial provision is already part of the quality framework and uses observations and learner focus groups to monitor provision.

The SAR states that the college undertook a review of pre-entry and entry procedures and improvements in this area are identified in the raising standards section. What progress has there been in implementing changes in this area?

- The review has supported continuous improvement and led to the development of many initiatives. Firstly the interview process has been adapted to gain more information from learners and to show them what will be expected of them e.g. showing completed work examples. Summer schools, where initial assessment can be carried out, have been increased and are relevant for existing students progressing to other courses as well as those new to the college. These initiatives aim to make it easier to put support in place earlier, which helps learners to settle in to their courses more quickly. Improved tracking of applicants is also helping the college prepare more effectively for new learners. Other developments which are proving beneficial are the increasing use of tutorial assistants to support those learners who might find the transition to college difficult, greater involvement of parents, increasing use of existing learners to help prepare new learners for their life in college and keeping in regular contact with learners once they have applied to college. In addition to all of these strategies the college regularly monitors its course entry requirements to ensure they give potential learners the best possible guidance and support in relation to their chosen course.

Leadership and management

In the recent inspection the self-assessment process was found to be comprehensive and the SAR to be accurate. However within curriculum areas there was some variation in the approach to target setting and some instances of slow rates of improvement. How has the college responded to these issues and what progress has been made?

- The process involving self assessments reports being prepared for programmes, which were then aggregated up into curriculum area reports, was used for the first time in preparation for 2005/06 SAR. It was reviewed in March/April 2007 and this showed that some areas were further on than others in the process of analysing evidence and judging grades. The discussions that took place have been beneficial and good

progress has been made in developing a culture of accountability. The process has been further refined for the 2006/07 SAR. With regard to target setting considerable progress has been made in relation to individual targets and staff taking responsibility for success rates in their area. For example, in beauty therapy, a range of strategies have been put in place and combined with specific monitoring meetings. These have shown significant positive impact on learner success rates this year.

The college is in the process of implementing a management restructuring. How will this support the college in dealing with the threats/risks identified in the SAR?

- All the changes covered by the restructuring have been designed to support the college in driving forward and raising standards. The senior management team (SMT) is being restructured to ensure there is a clear focus on dealing effectively with external requirements such as changes to funding mechanisms, partnership working and responsiveness to employers and an equally strong focus on internal requirements such as curriculum development and raising standards. In addition changes have taken place to make sure key areas of responsibility are covered by both SMT and college management team (CMT) members. Curriculum areas have been combined to create three coherent divisions and opportunities for enhanced lecturer posts, supporting the focus on raising standards. Student support services have been brought together to help create a 'one stop shop' to improve learner access and support and the new learning sets have re-invigorated staff development.