

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Dunstable College
Date of visit: 6 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

What actions has the college taken to address low pass rates on many courses? What improvements are evident from the 2005/06 data? What is the trend for 2006/07?

- College data for 2005/06 show significant improvement in long course success rates for 16 to 18 year old learners, and rates are broadly in line with national averages. Retention rates are above national averages. Success rates for adult learners on long courses have also improved and are broadly in line with national averages, except at level 1. There has only been a small increase in the success rates of programmes at this level from 43% in 2004/05 to 46% in 2005/06, 16% below the national average. The college recognises that achievements have been poor in two specific areas: on a community 'keep fit through dance' programme where more than 150 learners did not submit work; and on information technology (IT) programmes delivered through two town centre learning shops where both retention and pass rates were poor. The success rate for short programmes for 16 to 18 year old learners, at 62%, remains well below the national average.
- College data for 2006/07 suggest further improvements in success rates. Retention data for 2006/07 show increases across level 1 programmes, but dips across level 2 and level 3 provision. College projections for achievement suggest improvements on 2005/06 outcomes at all levels.
- The college has reduced the number of additional qualifications on full-time programmes as well as full-time programmes which were composed of a number of individual qualifications. Quality assurance processes have been sharpened to include more regular course reviews which report on early performance trends. External support on the use of timely data

and effective quality assurance processes has been valued highly. Data are available to staff on-line and it is planned to develop this further in 2007/08.

How effective have measures been to improve attendance and punctuality?

- The college recognises attendance and punctuality as key improvement areas. Processes for monitoring and following up learner absences have been tightened but only a small increase of 1% in attendance has been achieved in 2006/07 to 81%. The college target of 85% was not achieved. Reports from lesson observations indicate some ongoing concerns about poor punctuality.

The inspection report noted that pass rates for key skills at all levels have remained very low in each of the three years up to 2004/05. Have pass rates improved and is there an improving trend?

- According to college data, key skills achievements in 2005/06 remain very low; level 1 15%, level 2 13% and of the 15 level 3 learners none were successful. The college is awaiting confirmation of final outcomes for 2006/07. Provisional data on success rates for key skills qualifications indicate that substantial progress has been made in this area. For 2006/07, the college set a headline target of a 30% success rate. College predictions, based on achievements to date, indicate that the college should exceed its target significantly, with an overall predicted success rate of more than 40%.

Overall and timely success rates on work-based learning programmes were low. Have the improvements noted in 2005/06 continued into 2006/07?

- The number of learners on apprenticeship programmes currently stands at approximately 50 learners, spread between the two areas of engineering and business administration. Current data for 2006/07 indicate that the college will broadly have maintained the improvement it made in 2005/06, compared with its success rates in 2003/04 and 2004/05. However, the small number of learners on each programme makes it difficult to compare outcomes in each year.

- The college recognises that overall success rates for learners on apprenticeship programmes, particularly in business administration, remain below national rates. It has taken a number of measures to address this issue, including ensuring that best practice from engineering has been adopted within business administration programmes. In particular, recruitment processes on to apprenticeship programmes have been reviewed and individual learner progress is tracked much more closely to identify any learners at risk at an early stage. It is, however, too early to comment on the success of these strategies at this stage.
- On Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes, the good progression rates for learners noted in the previous inspection report have been maintained. Predicted progression rates for learners in 2006/07 are expected to be in the order of 65%.

Quality of education and training

At inspection the percentage of lessons which were judged to be good or better was low. What steps have been taken to improve the profile of teaching and learning observations across the college? How successful have these strategies been?

- The focus of the college has been to improve teaching and learning, offer regular staff development programmes to develop practice and on a better adherence to quality systems by staff. In 2006/07 226 teachers were observed compared with 175 in 2005/06. The proportion of good or better teaching has increased significantly and is 64% compared to 50% in the previous year. The proportion of inadequate teaching at 4% is unchanged. The college has prioritised developing teachers' skills through the teaching training programme and staff development activities, and focussing on activities and outcomes for learners, to reflect closely actions plans on teaching observation records. Peer observation takes place to support inadequate teaching and learning but is not used systematically to develop teachers who are graded as satisfactory. The use of subject learning coaches in some curriculum areas has been successful in improving practice. The integration of key skills and 'Every Child Matters' outcomes into teaching and learning activities is not yet fully developed. Actions plans on teaching observation records are detailed but records do not capture feedback from teachers.

How effective is the promotion of equality and diversity in lessons?
How well is this monitored?

- The college has recently appointed an equal opportunities coordinator. A significant minority of college staff have taken part in awareness raising activities to date. The embedding of equality and diversity within the curriculum is at an early stage and the use of equality and diversity impact measures is underdeveloped.

How effective are progress reviews for learners? How well are specific and challenging targets set and monitored?

- The college has put in place a range of measures to improve its learner review processes, and to ensure greater clarity between staff and learners in agreeing individual targets to help learners succeed.
- In 2006/07, the college introduced a new learner progress pack for all full-time learners, which sets a clear and coherent framework for individual progress review. The college has carried out extensive training for staff to support them in setting specific and measurable targets with their learners. In addition, induction procedures and the new staff handbook have been amended to include clear guidance on the use of the learner progress pack.
- Early indications are that the new processes are generally working effectively, and that staff value the contribution that the processes make to guiding learners more effectively. At the same time, lesson observations provide some evidence that staff are planning more effectively to cover the needs of all learners.
- The college recognises that further quality assurance monitoring and evaluation is required, and has plans to introduce external auditing of the learner review documentation and processes. A detailed evaluation of learner feedback on the learner review processes has not yet been conducted. Learner focus groups are established in some areas of the college to assist in this evaluation. The college recognises that some staff require further support in target setting in order to achieve greater consistency across the college, and has clear plans to take this forward.

Leadership and management

To what extent has progress been made in improving the coordination and consistency of key skills provision and what impact is this having on pass rates?

- The college has made improvement in key skills provision a clear priority in its post-inspection action plan. Additional resources have been allocated to this area. In particular the recent appointment of three specialist coordinators has allowed the college to provide additional guidance and a wide range of direct support to tutors delivering key skills across all areas of the college. This includes frequent training workshops for tutors, support for key skills delivery, and guidance in assignment writing, particularly to increase the relevance and clarity of assignments for learners. In addition the coordinators have been proactive in helping staff improve the quality of learners' portfolios.
- The management of information relating to key skills has also improved. The college has put in place clear measures to monitor learner progress in key skills much more closely, based on regular reviews by course team leaders, to identify those areas where prompt action is needed. Additional support is provided for learners where progress is slow, or where learners are in danger of failing to achieve.
- The college has also expanded its facilities for providing access to on-line testing, and has plans to add further facilities. The college is encouraging some staff to take qualifications in key skills, or to consider taking a specialist award in supporting learning in literacy and numeracy. A few staff have completed these awards, and further development of this area is planned for next academic year.

Curriculum management and achievements and standards in the leisure, travel and tourism curriculum area were identified as being inadequate at the last inspection. What progress has been made to address the areas for improvement identified?

- The curriculum area of travel and tourism is managed through the department of health and social care and sport through health, beauty and sport. Sport has relocated to the Kingsland site where facilities and resources have been improved. Curriculum provision has been reshaped to meet the needs of learners and to aid progression. There is currently no level 1 provision in travel and tourism. There are closer and expanding links with local employers and developing partnerships.

Progress is being made in improving retention, particularly in sport, although some historic issues relating to retention on two-year programmes have yet to work through. A more rigorous learner selection process is in place. Staff have worked closely and successfully with external consultants on actions to improve achievement and standards and the quality of provision. The proportion of good or better teaching has improved to 63% in 2006/07 across the two areas from 45% the previous year and the proportion of inadequate teaching has reduced significantly.

How effective has the college been in addressing the issues raised in inspection and in improving performance overall? Are improvements being sustained?

- Quality processes continue to develop and there is a sharper focus on cross-college consistency of approach. The accuracy of data to inform college performance has improved. The college is using data more robustly at census checks and in course reviews. The college is introducing a quality assurance pack across college for 2007/08 with the aim of reinforcing quality improvement processes further. The college recognises that the monitoring of its quality assurance processes through spot checks and course audits is underdeveloped. Overall quality has been monitored closely through the governors' standards committee.
- The post-inspection action plan identifies clearly the areas for improvement noted at the last inspection and actions are monitored closely. The college is making progress to address the issues raised in inspection, specifically in improving success rates and the quality of teaching and learning. College data suggest that improvements in success rates in 2005/06 will be sustained in 2006/07.

Any themes from the pre-visit analysis not explored during the visit:

- None

Any other observations from the visit not identified in the pre-visit analysis:

- Curriculum provision has been broadened and a number of GCE A levels have been offered from 2006/07 to meet local needs. Numbers of full- and part-time learners on these programmes are currently small.

- The college regards increased employer engagement as a key strategic priority, and it is working very effectively to strengthen its links with local employers through a wide range of initiatives. It has strengthened its internal structures and systems to support this priority, and has appointed a director of business development to lead on this. The college begins an extensive Train to Gain programme in September 2007. It has also established close links with an employment agency to provide substantially more work placements and work experience opportunities for full-time students. The college has set clear targets for each area of the college for employer engagement, and further staff training events are to take place shortly.