

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Boston College
Date of visit: 20 November 2007

Context

Boston College is a medium-sized general further education (FE) college situated in the market town of Boston, in South-East Lincolnshire. In 2005/06, there were around 9,500 learners enrolled at the college, of whom one quarter were aged 16-18 and the others were adults. The college provides courses in almost all subject-sector areas with the largest numbers of learners following courses in information and communications technology (ICT) and preparation for life and work.

Achievement and standards

How successful has the college been in improving the achievement and standards of learners in 2006/07?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

At the time of the monitoring visit in November 2007, around 5% of qualification outcomes were still unknown. The overall success rate on long courses in 2006/07 increased slightly and is likely to be similar to the national average. The overall success rate for 16-18 year olds also increased slightly in 2006/07, mainly due to better success rates at level 1. The success rate for adults, however, decreased slightly in 2006/07. Although an increase was noted at level 2, a significant decrease at level 1 formed the basis of the decline in the overall rate. Much of this decrease at level 1 was due to low retention rates on ESOL courses. Although the overall success rate for ESOL improved in 2006/07 and pass rates are high, a significant number of adults failed to complete their courses. The college report that the transient migrant population is a significant factor and is employing a range of strategies to improve retention on ESOL courses. Success rates on apprenticeship frameworks were significantly above national averages in 2005/06 and these rates were maintained in 2006/07.

What progress has the college made in improving the employability skills of learners?	Significant progress
---	----------------------

The college has a clear focus on improving the employability skills of learners. Strategies for improvement include developing programmes to meet the needs of vulnerable young people who might otherwise not engage in education, training or employment; enhancing the economic well-being of learners through tutorials and other activities; and liaising with employers to ensure that vocational programmes meet their needs. The college provides vocationally-related programmes to increasing numbers of disengaged learners. These programmes include a wide range of employability skills and additional qualifications, most of which are accredited. Learners make good progression from these programmes to further education, training or employment. The curriculum also provides a good range of work-based learning opportunities and relevant work experience. Self-assessment within the college includes a review of how well each curriculum area improves the employability skills of learners. Good relationships with local employers ensure that they are consulted about optional units in vocational qualifications and which additional qualifications they find most useful.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in supporting part-time teachers through continuing professional development?	Significant progress
--	----------------------

The college has implemented a range of measures to improve the professional development of part-time staff. All part-time staff complete 12 days of training a year. In addition, all new part-time staff attend a two day induction, which includes valuable time with advanced practitioners who discuss effective teaching and learning strategies. Staff are paid for attending induction and training activities. Part-time staff are particularly well supported by the advanced practitioners, who offer additional advice and share good practice by demonstrating teaching methods. All staff, including those who are part-time, have a yearly developmental observation before their graded observation of teaching and learning. Advanced practitioners work closely with part-time staff following observations to further develop their skills. The annual progress review has been extended to include part-time teachers, and their staff development is based clearly on identified needs.

Detailed records of progress are recorded thoroughly, with specific targets which are monitored regularly by managers. The proportion of good or better teaching by part-time staff increased from 47% in 2005/06 to 65% in 2006/07. The college has a challenging target to raise it to at least 73% in 2007/08.

How successful has the college been in improving the tutorial provision?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

During 2006/07, the college established a common tutorial policy and developed a wide range of tutorial resources that is available to staff via the virtual learning environment. All staff were trained on how to make the best use of tutorials and how to access and use the supporting resources. Staff are also supported by advanced practitioners with a particular responsibility for tutorials. Staff within curriculum areas devise their own schemes of work based on the common tutorial materials. Tutorials are audited regularly to assess compliance with the policy. Teachers report more structured and consistent tutorial practice than in recent years, with a greater focus on using tutorials to support learning, raise standards and enhance personal development and wellbeing. Relatively few tutorials were observed and graded in 2006/07, although these were all judged to be good or better, a significant improvement on the previous year. A greater number of observations are planned for 2007/08, although there are no plans in place to observe all tutors within a defined time period. The college is seeking feedback from staff and learners to further enhance the tutorial provision.

How successful has the college been in improving the availability of learner support services across both main sites?	Significant progress
---	----------------------

Since the previous inspection the college has greatly extended learner support services, and restructured the provision. Learner services now offer a full range of careers advice, counselling, advice relating to financial matters, and disability and health advice at the de Montfort as well as the Rochford site. Since recently achieving a contract for giving guidance as well as advice, the college offers this in all its centres. Following this expansion, the provision is now structured into four areas. These include teams who manage additional learning support, information, advice and guidance, learner services and professional counselling. All these teams now measure their impact in appropriate ways against their detailed service standards.

They collect clear and well presented data on a wide range of interventions and outcomes. Although managers have not yet collected data for long enough to make judgements about trends, the findings are sufficiently robust to show that provision is now offered equally, and the quality of provision is similar, at the two sites.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in implementing its Equality and Diversity Action Plan?	Significant progress
--	----------------------

The college established a new and enthusiastic equality and diversity group about eighteen months ago, which is chaired by the Principal. The group meets regularly and communicates its activity through the college intranet. All curriculum areas now include thorough evaluations of the actions they are taking to embed equality and diversity in their self assessment reports. The college now regularly reviews its curriculum offer against equality criteria, and develops programmes to meet the needs of the changing communities which it serves. The number of support staff who work with the growing number of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities has increased significantly. The college offers a range of provision at learning centres, and the college website makes it easier for rural communities to request short courses. These are then delivered either in a mobile classroom, fully equipped with laptops and whiteboard, or in local halls, with teaching resources provided by the college. Learners access free crèches when this is appropriate. Specific courses are provided for young people who have previously been disengaged from education or training. An extended transition programme for young people with learning disabilities in schools has increased the proportion of those continuing to further training from 45% to 95%. All staff have been trained in equality and diversity awareness, and also in a range of teaching and learning strategies to meet individual learning needs. Some staff are learning basic Polish to help them respond effectively to the needs of the growing number of Polish learners.