

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: West Kent College
Date of visit: 4 March 2008

Context

West Kent College is a large general further education college, mainly located in the town of Tonbridge. The college's mission is to 'inspire our students to realise their full potential and equip themselves with the skills and knowledge they need for a successful working life'.

This monitoring visit follows the inspection in March 2006 and an Annual Assessment Visit (AAV) in December 2006. At the previous inspection, West Kent College overall effectiveness was judged to be good. Capacity to improve achievement and standards and leadership and management was judged to be good. The quality of provision was graded as satisfactory. Of the six subject sectors inspected, three subject sectors were graded as good and three graded as satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in long course success rates since the previous inspection?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection, the college has made reasonable progress in improving long course success rates. The overall long course success rate has improved by 8% points to 71% in 2006/07. Most improvement has been on adult courses where success rates have risen by 14% points to 74%. Adult success rates are generally good with significant progress made at level 2. The overall success rate for 16-18 year old students has risen by 4% points to 69% in 2006/07. Success rates for 16-18 year old students at level 2 have improved, although at levels 1 and 3 success rates have only made a slight improvement. The number of students taking level 1 programmes has substantially increased over the past 2 years. In response to this key area of growth, the college has recently appointed a cross college, level 1 co-ordinator. The college is aware of the issues around level 3 success rates but

has been slow to make satisfactory progress to improve. Managers and teachers have insufficient knowledge of the variations in success rates and progress of students of different ages and abilities. Retention rates have improved for all students but particularly for adults. Retention for the current academic year, up to March 1st overall is 93%. Achievement rates for adults have also made good improvement but 16-18 year olds achievement rates have not improved over three years.

Work based learning apprenticeship success rates have much improved over three years and are satisfactory at 60%.

Key skills success rates have improved only slightly since the previous inspection compared to a much improving national average. Overall they have risen by 4% points over 3 years. The students' views on the value of key skills are mixed.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in developing a more rigorous lesson observation scheme that can be used to improve the quality and consistency of teaching?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in improving weaknesses in the observation of teaching and learning that were identified in the previous inspection and annual assessment visit. The 2006/07 self assessment report judged teaching and learning as good. In 2006/07, 80% of teaching and learning was internally graded as good or better. The self assessment report identifies key strengths and areas for improvement in the quality of teaching and learning.

Lesson observations now provide managers with effective summaries of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning. In those observation records reviewed, the feedback generally focused on the quality of teaching and not on learning. In some observation records, it was not clear how the strengths and areas for improvement supported the grade awarded. However, professional development and training to improve the quality of teaching and learning has been timely and well received by teachers.

Generally, staff value observation feedback and actions for improvement, although it is not clear how actions for improvement are monitored in a timely manner. The recently introduced 15 minute observations by line managers are seen as a positive development. Line managers monitor set

targets and confirm when met, although it is not clear if all met targets meet with the colleges overall aims and objectives.

Managers recognise the need to further improve the rigour of teaching and learning as a key area for improvement. Further plans to improve the teaching and learning process are in place.

What progress has been made in further developing a college Skills for Life strategy and approach?	Significant progress
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West Kent College has made significant progress in developing and implementing a cross college Skills for Life strategy. Plans to develop a Skills for Life strategy have clear, time constrained targets. There is a good focus on raising the skills levels of staff and more qualified staff have been recruited to teach numeracy and ESOL. Skills for Life teachers are now qualified to level 4. The college is running a level 5 literacy training course and is planning to introduce similar level courses in numeracy and ESOL for the next academic year. Minimum qualification levels have been set for recruitment purposes and unqualified staff have been provided with training and support.

The college has also raised awareness of Skills for Life across the college and trained tutors and support staff. A new assessment procedure is now in place and vocational tutors oversee all initial assessment of Skills for Life at the pre-entry interview stage for all students. Over 40 tutors have received training in the rationale and delivery of initial assessment and its interpretation.

What actions has the college implemented to ensure that all tutorials are of a good and standard quality?	Reasonable progress
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Reasonable progress has been made by the college to ensure a consistent standard of tutorials. The tutorial system has been reviewed since the last inspection and a new tutorial coordinator. A tutorial toolkit and a teaching pack have been developed and contain a useful range of resources and activities. There is a stronger focus on themes around every child matters this year. A comprehensive personal tutor handbook has also been developed. Personal tutors are very positive about the increase to two hours per week for scheduled tutorials, but it is too early yet to make a judgment on its impact on attendance levels. Useful and relevant training has taken place this year focussing on counselling and use of the new tutorial resource pack.

What progress has been made to the setting and monitoring of individual learning plan targets?	Insufficient progress
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The college has made insufficient progress in developing and monitoring individual learning plan targets. Inconsistencies still remain in setting and monitoring of learner targets. Whilst some individual learning plans have measurable targets, too many do not and others are not helpful in informing learners of their short term objectives and tasks. The college's observations scheme of tutorials, acknowledges these as areas for improvement.

Leadership and management

How rigorous is the self assessment process to bring about continuous improvement?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress to improve the self assessment process and to bring about continuous improvement. Self assessment is inclusive and staff teams meet to develop and approve the report. Students have good opportunities to make their views heard, and there are examples of the college taking positive action following their feedback. Curriculum and cross college self assessment reports are detailed and robust.

Managers have are more rigorous in grading curriculum areas. In the 2006/07 self assessment report, of the 22 curriculum areas awarded grades, 8 areas have declined overall and 2 areas have improved. All staff have a clear understanding that improvement of success rates is a key college target.

Development plans link well to the self assessment report and action plan targets are appropriately monitored. However, curriculum teams are not always clear how targets are to be met.