

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Dunstable College
Date of visit: 22 and 23 January 2008

Context

Dunstable College is a medium sized general further education college and is one of three colleges serving Bedfordshire. It is located in the heart of the town and, in addition, operates primarily from four small sites in Leighton Buzzard, Houghton Regis and Luton.

In 2006/07, college data show there were 6,540 funded enrolments. Of these, 2308 enrolments were learners aged 16-18 (around 45% of the total cohort) and 4,232 enrolments were adults. Around 17% of learners were from a minority ethnic background, significantly higher than the average for south Bedfordshire, and 59% of learners were female.

The college offers programmes in 13 of the 15 sector subject areas. The majority of learners are enrolled on programmes in information and communications technology, preparation for life and work, health, public services and care, and retail and commercial enterprise. In 2006/07, 50 learners followed work-based learning (WBL) apprenticeships and 30 entry to employment (E2E) programmes.

Last inspection and AAV

Dunstable College was last inspected in April 2006 and was judged to be inadequate as a result of poor achievement and standards overall. The quality of provision and leadership and management were judged to be satisfactory. The curriculum areas were judged to be satisfactory, with the exception of leisure, travel and tourism which was judged to be inadequate. At the first monitoring visit in July 2007, improvements in long course success rates were evident in 2005/06 and progress had been made across the areas for improvement identified at inspection. The attendance target of 85% had not been achieved in 2006/07 and reports from lesson observations highlighted concerns about poor punctuality. The embedding of equality and diversity within the curriculum was identified as being at an early stage and

the use of impact measures underdeveloped. This is the second monitoring visit following the April 2006 inspection.

Achievement and standards

What improvements are evident from success, retention and achievement rates data for 2005/06 and 2006/07, including 14-16 and key skills outcomes? How well is value added data used?	Significant progress
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Since the last inspection in April 2006, college data indicate the overall long success rate has improved from 47% in 2004/05 to 67% in 2006/07. The overall success rate of 74% for 2006/07 suggests a 20 percentage point improvement compared with 2004/05. Success rates on provision for 14-16 learners are high. Retention has improved overall since the last inspection and college data indicate a further rise in 2006/07 to 86%. In year data at the time of the monitoring visit indicate an upward trend. For learners on long programmes, college data indicate retention is broadly in line with outcomes for 2004/05 and there is some variability between departments. There has been significant progress to address the low pass rates on many courses identified at the last inspection. College data indicate the achievement rate for 16-18 learners on long programmes is now 83%, some 20 percentage points above the position in 2004/05. For adult learners, the rate of 85% is an improvement of 26 percentage points. College data indicate attendance continues to improve, but there is variability between departments. A system for tracking and reporting on learners' punctuality has been introduced in September 2007 but it is too early to judge its impact to improve retention. The college recognises that the use of measures to assess learners' progress is underdeveloped. Key skills success rates have improved to around the national averages from extremely low rates at the time of the last inspection. The self-assessment report (SAR) recognises the variability of success rates between departments. The overall success rate in engineering and construction fell by 14% compared with 2005/06 due to low pass rates.

Have improvements noted in 2005/06 for work-based learning continued into 2006/07? Have the good progression rates for E2E learners been maintained?	Reasonable progress
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Improvements in work based learning have continued into 2006/07. Data for 2006/07 indicate that the college has continued to improve success rates since 2004/05 and through 2005/06. Overall framework success rates have

increased this year to 56%; however this is still below the national average of 59%. The overall timely success rate has improved over the last three years and is now 59%; the national average is 63%. Work based learners also have the opportunity to complete qualifications above and beyond their framework requirements including health and safety, budget management and first aid courses. However, learner numbers remain low on all programmes. On E2E programmes, the success rate has risen significantly from 64% for 2006/07 to 94% in year for 2007/08. Managers and staff have recognised that action is required in identifying and dealing with the retention of work based learners. Data indicate that those who reach the end of the programme are successful.

Quality of provision

How successful have strategies to improve teaching and learning been? Have actions to improve the quality of teaching and learning been sustained?	Significant progress
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Significant progress has been made in the frequency of teaching and learning observations. Up to July 2007, the college had completed 226 observations compared with the previous year of 175, an increase of 23%. Since the last monitoring visit, a further 91 observations have taken place. Good and better grades increased from 64% in July 2007 to 73% up to December 2007, satisfactory grades fell from 32% to 23%. Whilst the proportion of inadequate teaching at 4% remains the same, plans are in place to support improvement. The college is clearly focussed on prioritising the development of teaching skills for all staff. The system of peer observation and use of subject learning coaches is effective in supporting staff to improve their practice. The staff development programme is extensive with weekly training sessions. The integration of key skills and Every Child Matters (ECM) topics into lesson planning is progressing well. Lesson observation forms are detailed and thorough and provide action plans where appropriate. The plans, monitored by the quality manager, provide good tracking and monitoring of the activities tutors carry out to develop their teaching skills.

How well does the range of provision meet learners' needs? Has the very effective 14-16 provision been maintained? How well has the need to increase employer engagement been met?	Significant progress
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The very effective 14-16 provision continues to expand with approximately 500 learners enrolled on a range of courses. The college has developed close

links with a special needs school with year 10 and 11 pupils studying entry level qualifications. An alternative curriculum programme is provided for pupils at risk of exclusion from five local schools and these learners achieved a high success rate. The college recognises there are small numbers on a range of courses and endeavours to maintain the breadth of provision across the levels.

The college has established a business development directorate to increase engagement with employers and the sector skills councils. This has been successful in increasing the range of opportunities in a number of vocational areas.

How effective are progress reviews for learners? How well are specific and challenging targets set and monitored?	Reasonable progress
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Learner packs introduced for all full-time and substantial part-time learners are used well by staff and learners to plan and monitor their learning. Short term targets are developed further by tutors and learners as progress is made. Targets are challenging and achievable. Learners take ownership of the documentation, indicating their enjoyment of the course and highlighting any difficulties they face in maintaining progress. The college has recognised that some staff require development in the setting of individual targets and continues to carry out training on individual target setting. Much help and guidance is offered to learners, but this is not always recorded in the learner pack. The college continues its work in developing documentation for part-time learners on short courses.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made to rectify curriculum management and achievement and standards issues identified in leisure, travel and tourism since the last inspection?	Reasonable progress
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College data indicate an improvement in overall success rates for leisure, travel and tourism since the last inspection from the very low rate of 26% in 2004/05 to 62% in 2006/07. This is still well below the national rate of 76% for 2005/06. The self-assessment report recognises improvement in success rates on level 1 and 2 programmes overall and a decline in rates on two-year level 3 programmes. Historical issues relating to poor retention at the end of

year 1 in 2005/06 were carried across to year 2 in 2006/07. These were further compounded in sports where learners found the combination of a national diploma and an additional qualification difficult to manage and achievement on this programme was low. The success rate on the level 2 and achievement on the two-year level 3 travel and tourism programmes was 100%. College data provided on the monitoring visit indicate improvements in retention on two-year programmes for learners starting in 2006/07. Group sizes are small in sport and on the level 2 travel and tourism programme. The two-year level 3 programmes have been restructured so that learners may achieve a full national award in year 1. A range of employer links and enrichment activities are in place, including a period of work experience for learners on the level 3 travel and tourism programme. Part-time provision is underdeveloped. The profile of good or better teaching improved from 45% in 2005/06 to 63% in 2006/07. Quality assurance procedures are rigorous.

What progress has the college made in sustaining improvements since the last inspection?	Significant progress
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Evidence gathered on the monitoring visit indicates sustained and significant improvements since the last inspection. Since the college introduced a new quality assurance manual from September 2007 greater consistency of practice across departments is being developed, although it is too early to comment on the impact overall. The extensive staff development programme also supports greater consistency of approach through targeted departmental activities well. Departmental quality processes are rigorous and well embedded. The leadership team follows up course audits and reviews effectively. The quality of teaching and learning continues to improve and the use of subject learning coaches across the college has contributed to this well.

The focus on continued improvement in retention rates, particularly for long programmes, has been sustained, although the impact remains variable. Departmental self-assessment reports identify areas for improvement and actions to address these effectively but some targets are not measurable. Managers work together critically and creatively to deliver the college's vision and speak positively of being 'on board' to continue the drive to improve further.

How effective are governors in monitoring the college's academic performance and sustaining improvements, specifically in achievements and standards?	Significant progress
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The governors maintain a strong commitment to securing improvements in the college, particularly relating to raising achievements and standards further. Governors have a good mix of skills, attend regularly and have link roles with college departments which they find useful. Their approach to self-assessment is rigorous and they provide an appropriate degree of challenge. Challenging and measurable targets are set and reviewed through the committee structure effectively. Governors have a good working knowledge of college and national key performance indicators. There is an active student governor. Governors have undergone child protection training.

How well does the college respond to the learner voice? How effectively are ECM themes embedded within the curriculum? What are the views of learners?	Significant progress
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ECM activities and outcomes are included well in schemes of work and lesson plans. Inspectors met with around 20 learners on the monitoring visit, who reported enjoying their studies and that they felt safe and secure on site. The approachability of, and support by tutors was highly valued. Learners are able to access appropriate guidance and additional support to meet their individual needs. A good range of work related and enrichment activities are on offer, but learners reported some degree of variability between programmes. Learners can air their views formally through questionnaires and student council meetings, and informally through contact with their tutors either in individual or group tutorials, and gave examples of where changes have been implemented. Learners reported that feedback from questionnaires could be better publicised across the college.

Key strengths of the college as perceived by the learners were the support, help and approachability of tutors, the friendly atmosphere, improved resources, the opportunity to meet new people and to be encouraged to realise their potential. Areas for improvement were highlighted as the need to replace older computers and increase access to information technology in general, and to improve communication around timetable changes and cover

for absent staff. In general, the learners consulted on the monitoring visit were very positive about the quality of their experience at the college.

<p>How effective is the promotion of equality and diversity in lessons and how well is this monitored? How well are equality and diversity impact measures developed and analysed?</p>	<p>Reasonable progress</p>
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The planning and development of equality and diversity measures are making reasonable progress. An audit is underway to establish how equality and diversity will be delivered within lessons across the college. Staff development on many aspects of equality and diversity is well attended and well received by staff. The planning of improvements to the college website including larger fonts and colour options is ongoing. Work is now complete on the disability and gender equality schemes and action plans to meet the new legislation.

The use of data to monitor minority ethnic achievement is an area for continuing development. The college circulates data widely and this is used for discussion at a range of meetings. However, there are difficulties in developing a focussed strategy using this data due to low numbers of learners on some programmes.