

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Epping Forest College

Date of visit: 13 March 2008

### Context

Epping Forest College is a general college of further education located in the Epping Forest area of West Essex, adjacent to the towns of Loughton and Debden. The college's catchment area is West Essex, but it attracts many of its 16-18 year old students from East London boroughs.

In 2006/07 the college had 1,891 students aged 16-18, the majority of whom studied full-time. Conversely, most of the 1,469 adult students studied part-time courses. The college also provided courses for 121 students aged 14-16. Of the students aged 16-18, 41% were of black or minority ethnic heritage. Approximately half of the students aged 16-18 live in areas of high economic disadvantage as do around 15% of adult students. Local unemployment rates are below average in Epping Forest but are higher in the East London boroughs served by the college.

The college provides courses covering 14 of the 15 subject areas. Its mission is: 'To provide high quality, inclusive further education for the communities we serve'.

### Achievement and standards

What progress do college data for 2006/07 show for students on long courses? In particular, what improvements have been secured for students aged 16-18 on level 3 courses?	Insufficient progress
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Despite improvements to some success rates in 2006/07, particularly for adult students, the college has made insufficient progress and outcomes at level 3 for both age groups remain low. College managers are keenly aware of the

need to improve success rates, but this self-critical awareness is not always reflected sufficiently in the self-assessment report (SAR).

College data for 2006/07 show improved success rates for adult students studying courses at levels 1 and 2. At these levels, adult students achieved sharply improved pass rates resulting in a success rate at level 1 slightly above the 2005/06 average and at level 2, significantly above the 2005/06 average. However, at level 3 the decline in retention and below average pass rates contributed to a success rate significantly below the 2005/06 average.

In 2006/07 success rates for students aged 16-18 remained broadly at the same level as in 2005/06. The greatest increase has been at level 1 where pass rates improved significantly; however, declining retention kept success rates at the 2005/06 national average. At level 2, success rates declined very slightly to below the 2005/06 average. Again, retention had the greatest impact with a decline to significantly below the 2005/06 average. In contrast, pass rates at this level have improved steadily. Level 3 results for students aged 16-18 are low and have remained static for the past three years. A slight improvement in retention was offset by poor pass rates and overall success rates remain very significantly below the average for general further education colleges.

College data show in-year retention has improved significantly compared to 2006/07 in construction and engineering and manufacturing. For all age groups on long courses, eleven curriculum areas are currently at 90% retention or better. However, four areas show a decline in retention. In leisure, travel and tourism, retention is low and has declined from 2005/06. Attendance is currently running at similar levels to last year.

## Quality of Provision

Has the new teaching and learning observation process been successful in increasing the proportion of good or better teaching? Are the links between success rates and teaching and learning now explored fully?	Reasonable progress
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Lesson observations are well established and organised. The college is on track to achieve their target of 100% of staff being observed. The database of major features identified through observation provides a useful

improvement tool for managers. Current data show that the substantial proportion of good or better teaching is being maintained and that the proportion of teaching judged to be less than satisfactory has been much reduced. The college has begun to explore the links between success rates and teaching grades more fully.

The moderation process is well organised as are joint observations for quality control. The sample of written observations examined showed an increased focus on learning and specific judgements on attainment and standards. Poor attendance is not commented on fully enough in all records and there are examples where the overall evaluation does not reflect the final grade with sufficient accuracy. The present position on sharing of best practice in teaching and learning is under-developed. For example, teachers in the two departments receiving a high proportion of outstanding grades are not used sufficiently to share good practice.

How successful have new strategies in employer engagement been in developing and implementing productive links?	Reasonable progress
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The college acknowledges in the SAR that it has been slow to develop a strategy for employer engagement. However, a number of initiatives suggest that, from a very low starting point, reasonable progress is being made.

The college maintains good relationships with employers who offer work placements for vocational courses and has plans to extend work placement opportunities for learners on non-vocational courses as part of the college's enrichment activities. More recent employer engagement initiatives have been successful in attracting full cost funding for courses in construction, gas fitting, information technology and motor vehicle engineering. A particularly positive initiative is a new franchised agreement to provide training in plumbing at levels 2 and 3 in Waltham Abbey. A productive partnership with a chain of hair dressing salons continues to offer good on-the-job training and employment opportunities for learners in hair and beauty.

The college is researching the local labour market to explore further opportunities to engage employers and are developing a database of contacts. Lead staff are developing a proposal to provide work-based learning

for young people and adults to widen the vocational offer and provide an alternative vocational route.

What progress has been made in 14-19 developments?	Reasonable progress
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The college is involved actively in the 14-19 local area planning group with six local schools. As part of this group, it is launching a web-based database for teachers, students and parents/carers that will outline the range of courses and opportunities available to 14-19 year olds in the area. This tool aims to enable more effective sharing of information about the details of a student's course, their progress, attendance and any other factors related to their learning. The college continues to maintain good relations with the Connexions service and the database has links to the Essex wide on-line prospectus and further information, advice and guidance for young learners. All members of the local partnership will have access to the database, designed to provide more effective coordination and monitoring of learning and the development of staff and resources to support learning.

The Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP) for 14-16 year olds continues to be offered in construction, motor vehicle and beauty therapy. Progression to further full-time college courses is good. The Waltham Abbey Vocational Education Centre (WAVE) is a collaborative initiative to provide IFP information technology training and is managed by the college as the lead partner. The new vocational diploma in engineering agreed last year, is due to start in September 2008 in partnership with a Hertfordshire school.

Have further improvements been secured to the college's response to the ECM agenda?	Reasonable progress
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Every Child Matters (ECM) continues to be given a high priority within the college and a new learner engagement strategy provides direction for this area. Work with the Students' Union has resulted in effective collaborative activities promoting staying safe and being healthy. It has also enabled students to make a positive contribution to developing the colleges' elective activities programme. Students from across the college participate in the governors' student liaison committee. There are examples of tutors promoting

effectively the participation of learners in a range of events including national fundraising initiatives and local concerns. Tutorial arrangements are robust and a staff library is being developed ready for the move to the new accommodation. This will include a range of resources mapped to the ECM outcomes, providing tutors with materials to support group tutorial activities.

The college participates in the Aim Higher initiative and offers a range of activities including visits to employers, universities and guest speakers to promote higher education opportunities. In 2006/07, 267 students applied for entry to higher education institutions and 240 were successful. This year, the number of students making applications has increased to 320. Connexions personal advisers are based on site three days a week and the college employs a qualified careers adviser to offer impartial careers advice. Students' safety has been maintained despite the difficulties presented during the construction of new accommodation. A new security contract was obtained in response to students' feedback.

The SAR assesses its contribution to students' enjoyment and achievement as good. As evidence for the grade, the college identifies the range of additional learning support and elective activities; however, it takes insufficient account of the need to improve success rates for students aged 16-18.

Does additional learning support continue to support students' progress effectively?	Reasonable progress
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The additional learning support service has been restructured recently to separate provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities from literacy, numeracy and language support. This is designed to target students' support more effectively and to embed responsibility in subject sector areas. All students enrolling on level 1 and 2 courses are screened and further diagnostic assessments are completed as required. The interview process continues to focus on barriers to learning and results in a more timely referral to learning support services or to a learner coach. Additional learning support is included on individual learning plans and students are advised to complete courses at a level in line with the results of their assessments. However, retention rates remain an area for improvement suggesting that students may not always be on the right course. Additional learning support is available equally for both young and adult learners; however, the

identification of needs is not as effective or timely for students on part-time courses.

Cross college training for staff in dyslexia awareness is offered as a rolling programme and there continues to be an increase in the screening and take-up of dyslexia support. The provision for additional support in literacy, numeracy and language has remained at the same level over the past two years. The number of students presenting with emotional, social and behaviour difficulties is growing as are the number of students on the autistic spectrum. The college has strong links with the Redbridge Autistic Unit and local special schools.

The support provided continues to have a positive impact on success rates. College data show retention rates for students receiving additional learning support are higher than those of students not receiving support.

#### Leadership and management

What progress has been made in securing improvements in leadership and management through recent restructuring and quality initiatives?	Reasonable progress
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The college is going through a period of significant change including a restructured management, new building and interim leadership. Many changes are at an early stage and it is too early to judge fully their effectiveness.

The early signs are that recent developments have increased greatly the confidence and morale of college managers. The interim principal has very rapidly established good communications and working relationships with staff. Support for quality improvement through an external agency has been welcomed by managers who acknowledge the need to improve significantly the success rates of students. Managers interviewed valued highly the support and training provided by the agency. An appropriate focus on curriculum planning and ensuring students are on the right courses has been established.

The restructuring is broadly welcomed with managers commenting on clearer roles and responsibilities; better communications; clear messages and vision for the college and an increased confidence that their views are listened to and taken into account. The appointment of quality development leaders to departments provides a useful focus for improvement and is welcomed by heads of department. The middle managers interviewed expressed confidence and optimism in the future development of the college.

### Accommodation

The new build is progressing on time with an expected handover date in August 2008 allowing the college to start the new term in its greatly improved accommodation. The design and layout of the building is attractive, light and spacious. The provision of the local Debden library at the front of the building, with a refectory area and the admissions office, is designed to encourage its use by the local community and to increase local recruitment. The provision of a turnstile barrier to the rest of the college is a measure of safety and control to limit the incidental flow of people through to unauthorised areas. Staff and students are excited about the opportunities the new building will offer and are eager for its completion.