

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Harlow College  
Date of visit: 25 September 2007

### Context

Harlow College is a tertiary college with over 6,000 students in 2006/07; approximately 32% of these study full time. The college is the main provider of post-16 education with only one school in Harlow having a sixth form. Harlow was designed as a new town in 1947 for 60,000 people. It now has a population of 80,000 and is due for major growth. Harlow has low unemployment and major employers but it also contains some areas of deprivation, a history of low aspirations and participation in learning, a poor health record and low skills base. The college is on a single site and offers courses in most sector subject areas over a wide range of levels. Most learners are from Essex and Hertfordshire and are of white ethnic origin.

The previous inspection judged that the college's overall effectiveness was satisfactory as were achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management. Capacity to improve was judged to be good.

The college has undergone a period of significant change since the inspection. The introduction of a new teaching and learning strategy was judged by the principal and managers to require radical changes to staffing structures and teaching and learning strategies. Subsequently, employment relations became strained and an industrial dispute was called. Approximately 80 of the 210 teaching staff left the college in the 2006/07 academic year. The college was also the subject of negative local and national publicity. Some stakeholders have expressed a high level of anxiety about the changes and their effect on students and staff. The college has introduced the new management structure and teaching and learning strategy, and recruited staff to replace those who have left.

## Achievement and standards

<p>What progress has the college made in improving success rates for learners? In particular, learners aged 16-18 at level 3 and success rates of apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships.</p>	<p>Insufficient progress</p>
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The previous inspection noted that achievements and standards were satisfactory with most success, retention and pass rates improving in the years 2004 to 2006. Success rates for adults were stated to be high with the exception of adults studying courses of between 5 and 24 weeks. Subsequent checking of college data demonstrated that adult success rates for 2005/06 had been overstated by the college and were inaccurate for all levels. Success rates for learners aged 16-18 on level 3 courses were low and declining, with significantly negative value added in many subjects. The proportion of learners achieving high grades was below national averages, particularly in GCE A level. Success rates for advanced apprenticeships had declined over the last three years and were below national averages. Whilst success rates for apprenticeships had increased significantly, they were also below national averages.

The progress and improvement judgment for achievement and standards is complicated by the previously inaccurate data for adult success rates as supplied by the college and published in the inspection report. Whilst accreditation and qualification complexities may have had an impact on level 1 success rates in 2006/07, college data now shows a sharp fall for adults and a slight fall for learners aged 16-18.

Level 2 success rates are broadly at the 2005/06 national averages but it is reasonable to expect these averages to rise by a similar percentage as in previous years, which would lead to the college rate being below the national average.

The college, as a major provider of level 3 courses, compares its performance appropriately against sixth form college averages. Level 3 success rates for learners aged 16-18 have not improved sufficiently and remain significantly below the sixth form college national average. For adults, the improvement of eight percentage points brings them to slightly above the 2005/06 national average.

Within the level 3 for learners aged 16-18, GCE A level success rates have improved sharply to 94%. However, within the GCE A level provision there remain subjects, such as English, with lower success rates.

The improvement in AS level success rates from 65% to 73% still leaves the college six percentage points below the 2005/06 sixth form college national average.

College data for 2006/07 shows an improvement in advanced apprenticeships to 37%, still below national averages and too low. Apprenticeships are shown as 57% compared to the 2005/06 national average of 44%.

### Quality of provision

<p>How successful have the college's leaders and managers been in securing adequately experienced and qualified staff able to deliver consistently good teaching and learning across and within curriculum areas?</p>	<p>Insufficient progress</p>
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Some 80 teaching staff within the college are new in post. The majority of these are new to teaching and many have no teaching qualifications, particularly those recruited to the new tutor role. Staffing shortages are still evident in a few areas. As a consequence some teaching groups are very large, in one case over 100. In addition, the college has identified a number of high risk curriculum areas.

Many of these staff have joined very recently and have had a minimum amount of preparation. Although the new tutor role does not specify whole-group teaching, some have acted in this role to large groups. College quality assurance procedures have not prevented some poor learning in these situations. Some classes are too large.

Although new staff feel they have been well supported, training for their new teaching role has not yet begun. The college has a good awareness of the implications of workforce reform for this process. All trainees have a mentor, but the role of this mentor is not well defined and training for these individuals is underdeveloped. Planning for the subject-specific mentoring roles of teacher training has not yet been completed.

Many staff are enthusiastic about the new teaching and learning strategy, in which students spend a whole day in class and have daily targets that are signed off when completed. Early indications are that this works well for many students. However, for others there is little emphasis on working to a high standard, when merely completing the work allows them to depart.

The system does not monitor consistently progress towards standards, particularly in non-vocational areas. A number of curriculum areas, notably science and mathematics and hairdressing, have successfully addressed this independently and effectively, but these systems are not shared across the college. The extent to which individual students are stimulated to meet challenging targets is therefore variable across the college.

The new lesson observation system has been in place for a very short period. The arrangements are systematic and timed by level of risk where staff are new or unqualified. Grades awarded are now moderated and in the small sample examined reflect the written evidence. However, the arrangements to monitor the quality of teaching and learning through informal observations are less clear and insufficiently synchronized with formal observations. Observations are as yet insufficiently aligned with appraisal and it is unclear how the impact of staff training on teaching and learning will be evaluated. The extent to which the college evaluates outcomes of the lesson observation system is underdeveloped. On occasion, feedback concentrates too much on teaching rather than the learning or progress which is taking place. The staff carrying out the observations demonstrate enthusiasm and commitment to their task and a genuine desire to improve learning in the college.

Governors are highly supportive of the principal, senior managers and the significant changes that have taken place during the past year. They are well informed generally about standards but are insufficiently clear on how governors will monitor appropriately the effect of recent changes and the impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

#### Leadership and management

<p>What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that curriculum management is consistently good or better? In particular, are data now robust, accessible and used well to set targets and secure improvements?</p>	<p>Insufficient progress</p>
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The new structure of the college has resulted in increased management responsibilities for staff, many of whom are relatively inexperienced in their roles. Those managers interviewed were enthusiastic and committed to new ways of working and identified the benefits as including much improved team working and clearer decision making processes, and made the point that they perceived themselves as now able to manage people rather than programmes.

The new system has established effective daily team meetings which are welcomed by staff and students as a means of discussing operational issues.

Teams such as those in engineering have continued to work with the same staff and demonstrate confidence in the structure and systems to improve further their provision. Other teams have lost experienced staff and face more challenges. The variation in quality therefore persists and ensuring consistent quality is recognised by senior and middle management as needing further development. Management training has been introduced and welcomed by middle managers who see it as effective and useful.

Data management has improved significantly and evidence suggests that the data now reflect accurately the achievement and standards of students. Managers express confidence in data to support their evaluation of courses and programmes.