

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Northumberland College

Date of visit: 30 April 2008

Context

Northumberland College is the only general further education college in the county. It has a main site in Ashington and additional sites at Kirkley Hall, Alnwick, Blyth and Berwick-upon-Tweed. The college offers outreach provision across the county using its learning bus. It has two Centres of Vocational Excellence for construction and inbound tourism.

The college was last inspected in January 2006. At that inspection the overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards and leadership and management were satisfactory. The quality of provision was good. Of the six curriculum areas inspected, three were good and three were satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in improving success rates?	Insufficient progress
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Insufficient progress has been made in improving success rates. In 2007, overall success rates on long courses for 16 to 18 year olds, although improved over the last three years, remain below the national average. Success rates on long courses for learners aged over 19 fell in 2007, from above to around the national average. Success rates improved on long courses at level 2 and 3 for 16 to 18 year olds; however at level 1 the rate has fallen over the last three years to below the national average. On long level 1 and 2 courses for learners aged over 19 the rates fell in 2007; at level 3 the rate remained at the same level as the previous year. Satisfactory progress has been made in improving retention rates. The rates have improved steadily over the last three years on level 1 and 2 courses for learners aged 16 to 18, and on all levels for those aged over 19. However, progress in improving pass rates has been insufficient. For learners aged 16 to 18 the pass rates on long level 1 and 2 courses have fallen over the last three years; at level 3 the rate has improved steadily to around the national average. On courses for those aged over 19 the rates on all levels declined in 2007.

In 2007 the overall and timely success rates for advanced apprenticeships are below the national averages. Whilst improving, overall success rates remain significantly

below the national average. However, timely success rates fell by 8% to below the national average. For apprenticeships, timely success rates improved significantly and are broadly in line with the national average. Overall success rates have also improved, however, they remain significantly below the national average. Success rates for Train to Gain provision are broadly in line with national averages.

The college's self-assessment report of achievement and standards for 2006/07 is insufficiently critical or evaluative. Success rates have not been compared with sufficiently challenging benchmarks. It overstates strengths in success rates on long courses for adults and does not accurately identify the full extent of weaknesses in pass rates. The report does not contain sufficient data on, and analysis of, apprenticeship success rates.

How effective have actions taken been in maintaining improvements in the quality of provision designed to meet the needs of employers?	Reasonable progress
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Effective actions are now in place to maintain and improve framework success rates. Staff now have clear guidance, detailed job descriptions, targets and performance monitoring to promote improvement. All staff have improvement targets relating to learner achievements. However, these targets do not take into account current success rates for sector subject areas. Some targets are insufficiently challenging.

Employer engagement is a high priority for the college. It is actively involved in many local, county and regional groups to help to ensure employer needs are being met. A draft community and outreach strategy has been written, with clear targets for employer engagement. Feedback from employers is being used more effectively to plan and deliver training. For example, employer forums are increasingly used to develop and improve provision. Good use is now being made of work-based training advisers to provide advice and information to employers. Innovative programmes have been developed to ensure that the college is working with employers to improve the training and qualifications of their employees. Essential skills programmes are now being delivered in the workplace and in outreach locations.

Strong partnership working across the county is proving effective in supporting adults to return to learning and employment.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in implementing more thorough arrangements for the observation of teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress
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The college's self-assessment of teaching and learning judges this aspect of the provision to be good, and accurately identifies the need to improve, the

thoroughness of the lesson observation scheme and levels of learners attendance at lessons. The report does not provide a sufficiently evaluative account of the characteristics of teaching which impact positively on learning and the areas which need improving.

Satisfactory progress has been made in improving arrangements for observation. A new policy is being implemented which specifies that all staff will be observed annually. The new procedures are more effectively focused on helping teachers to identify and understand what they need to do to improve. Revised management structures are providing clarity for staff regarding their roles and responsibilities in this aspect of quality assurance. The team of observers has been reduced to help to ensure consistency in grades awarded. A programme of staff development has taken place to train observers in how to identify the characteristics of effective teaching and learning and in how to give useful feedback to teachers. In addition, the recently appointed curriculum area managers have been provided with good support from Quality Improvement Agency advisers to help them to moderate the outcomes from observations and to action plan for improvement. The professional development manager now draws together the outcomes from observations to produce a staff development plan for each curriculum area. These plans should provide good evidence to support the whole college self-assessment of teaching and learning for 2007/08. More needs to be done to put in place arrangements to monitor the impact of staff development on the quality of teaching. The new observation policy does not place sufficient priority on improving the quality of satisfactory teaching.

Leadership and management

How effective are management information systems in gathering and using data to improve the quality of the provision?	Reasonable progress
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A new Vice Principal, Finance and Corporate Services, who brings useful experience from the private sector to the role, took up post at the start of this academic year. Since then new finance systems have been introduced that are improving arrangements for financial control and budget monitoring. Access to reliable data on learners' performance has continued to improve. Data is now presented in a range of useful formats including graphical reports. Regular staff development in how to use pro-achieve is increasing the use of data on learners' retention and pass rates. However, attendance is voluntary and not all staff have been trained. Data is used increasingly to monitor students at risk and underperforming courses. However, the college does not use data as part of a systematic approach to performance management. At the time of the monitoring visit the college was not able to provide clear reports on progress made in improving learner's attendance and levels of retention.

What progress has been made in improving arrangements for identifying and sharing good practice?	Reasonable progress
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Reasonable progress has been made in improving the sharing of good practice across the college. Weekly meetings of the curriculum area managers, assistant principals and the vice principal are providing good opportunities to share progress and practice. The outcomes of these meetings are shared regularly with all curriculum staff through timetabled team meetings. Frequent meetings of the e-learning champions, subject learning coaches and senior tutors are also beginning to have an impact on ensuring that the whole college is informed of good practice. The recent re-organisation of the work roles of the e-learning champions is improving the support available to teachers. Increasing use of the college virtual learning environment is facilitating better sharing of teaching and learning resources.

Professional development days are now clearly identified on the college calendar and staff from all college centres are able to attend these days. Optional evening drop-in sessions have also been arranged to support teachers to improve in areas such as classroom management and in managing challenging behaviour.

Sharing good practice actions are now resulting in change across the college. For example, curriculum delivery in one area has been changed as a result of successful practice in another, and positive feedback from learners about induction to their courses is being used to improve the experience for all learners in 2008/09.

What progress has the college made in developing and implementing its learner involvement strategy?	Reasonable progress
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The college has developed its learner involvement strategy in conjunction with students. A wide range of strategies, such as questionnaires, forums and the student council, are used to collect information from learners regarding their experiences at the college. This information feeds into reviews of the quality of the provision that are carried out during tutorials, at governors meetings and through arrangements for self-assessment. Changes to the way questionnaires are used have resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of learners responding. Feedback to learners on their comments are provided through a useful 'you said we did' feedback mechanism. Many learners are positive about these processes and the impact that they are beginning to have on the services the college provides for them. For example, they were involved in a significant re-organisation of the learning resources centre. However, much of the feedback is provided through the tutorial system for full-time learners and some part-time learners do not receive feedback.

Good support to student governors on their roles and responsibilities is provided through mentoring from staff members of the board. Many learners are unaware

that there are student governors and some are unaware of the role of course representatives.