

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Dearne Valley

Date of visit: 30 June 2008

Context

Dearne Valley College is a medium sized general further education college serving the former coalfield communities of south east Barnsley, south west Doncaster and north Rotherham. The college has undergone rapid growth during the past decade. It has over 1,300 full-time learners and around 4,000 part-time learners. The 16-18 year old student population currently makes up approximately 85% of the full-time cohort.

At the previous inspection the college's overall effectiveness was good. Capacity to improve, quality of provision, and leadership and management were good.

Achievements and standards were satisfactory. An annual assessment visit was carried out in July 2007.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made towards the improvement of success rates for apprentices?	Reasonable progress
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The trend is one of continued improvement. Timely success rates have risen from 22.7% in 2006/07, to 39.5% in April 2008, the latest date for which validated data is available. The college claims that overall success rates are currently 64%, a figure that could rise to a maximum of 68%. The number of work-based learners has risen from 23 in 2005/06 to 49 in April 2007/08. The majority of these are construction apprentices.

Several developments have supported this rise in success rates since the previous inspection. The management and use of data has improved, co-ordination of work-based learning across the college has been strengthened, and considerable efforts have been made to improve the delivery of key skills.

The co-ordination of work-based learning has been strengthened through the appointment in June 2007 of a business development manager to oversee the co-ordination of work-based learning contracts and develop work with employers. She meets each month with the management information manager responsible for work-based learning to reconcile data. The monitoring of learner progress is supported through the use of the improved management information system and regular meetings between the business development manager and curriculum staff. These are supplemented by quarterly meetings with work-based learning tutors.

The college has taken a clear strategic view over the future expansion of work-based learning. Provision in sport is small but growing, supported by developing links with local football clubs. The college wishes to extend its work-based learning provision to other vocational areas, building on existing curriculum strengths. However, it does not propose to recruit any more engineering apprentices in the short-term, recognising the need to strengthen this vocational area.

Overall the college has made reasonable progress in improving success rates for apprentices.

What progress has been made towards improving success rates for adults at level 1?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates have improved at level 1 for 19+ learners by 7% over the two last complete years. Although the improvement over the last three years has been very small, from 53% to 55%, the cohort has changed significantly over this time. The overall number of learners has dropped from 688 to 249 following changes to funding for adult learning, and the proportion of skills for life learners has risen. The college expects the current year's figure to show a further improvement following the changes to some course provision, including the phasing out of some information technology (IT) qualifications with poor success rates. The college claims that changes to the qualification aims on courses for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities have also adversely affected 2006/07 success rates. However, these two factors affect a relatively small proportion of learners.

The college development plan for 2007/08 has focused on adult delivery at levels 2 and 3. However, the college remains committed to support and maintain links with local communities through the continued provision of personal and community development programmes, courses for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, and community-based basic skills workshops. It has also taken steps to strengthen skills for life provision, improving the specialist qualification levels of the team and bringing together the management of skills for life and key skills. The college proposes to appoint an enhanced lecturer for skills for life in the near future to further support the transition to functional skills and to focus on improving success rates.

Overall the college has made reasonable progress towards improving success rates for adults at level 1. Action taken is beginning to have a beneficial impact on learners, although it is too soon to measure the success of actions in the management of skills for life.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving the delivery of key skills for apprentices since the previous inspection?	Reasonable progress
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Overall reasonable progress has been made in improving the delivery of key skills to support the improvement of work-based learning success rates. Since the movement of key skills staff into curriculum divisions from a central department three years ago, key skills tutors are increasingly seen as part of the vocational area teams. This has raised the profile of key skills and is now beginning to impact on key skills delivery for apprentices. Extra key skills sessions for small groups of apprentices were offered during half-term holidays at February, March and October over the last year. The skills for life team have worked with work-based assessors to raise their awareness of learners' literacy and numeracy needs. The college has sought to improve the continuity between national tests and key skill portfolio requirements by moving to the same awarding body for both. It has gained direct claim status following its first external verification.

Plans yet to be implemented are the provision of two intensive one week key skills communication workshops at the end of July designed to help apprentices successfully complete a level 2 test as early as possible. Other apprentices will attend discrete group sessions to ensure their progress is carefully monitored. The college intends to appoint a key skill tutor to support key skill development in the workplace.

What progress has been made towards further improving the use of information learning technology?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made substantial improvements to the information learning technology infrastructure, equipping 85% of classrooms with interactive whiteboards. Modern, high specification personal computers have been purchased for use by learners and staff and the network has been significantly upgraded. Staff also have access to a pooled bank of laptops to develop resources. The college is introducing a new virtual learning environment from September 2008 and a start has been made to transfer resources from the previous virtual learning environment in readiness. Staff completed a self-evaluation online questionnaire on their IT abilities and a full day of staff training has taken place on aspects of information learning technology. Staff selected two workshops from a range of topics including the use of the newly developed virtual learning environment, use of interactive whiteboards and the use of various software packages. The number of information learning technology mentors who support staff has increased from three at the time of the previous inspection to five. Further staff training is planned but it is too early to assess how this will improve the use of information learning technology in the classroom.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made towards the accurate monitoring of teaching and learning and its continuous improvement?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant improvements to the arrangements for monitoring teaching and learning since the previous inspection. It has further developed its teaching observation process and introduced new documentation for this purpose. In 2006/07, 80% of lessons were graded good or better and no lessons were graded inadequate. In 2007/08 the college found 75% of lessons to be good or better and 2.5% of sessions to be inadequate. The college maintains that this is due to more thorough systems of grading and moderation. The proportion of outstanding teaching observed by the college has increased by 6%. An annual report on the quality of teaching and learning is presented to the academic board and the governors' standards committee for consideration. This includes an analysis of teaching and learning grade profiles for full- and part-time staff.

The team of 26 managers and enhanced lecturers that carry out observations of teaching and learning are well trained and have good access to opportunities to share good practice and discuss findings. They carry out their role effectively. Joint observations of teaching and learning are used for moderation. Standardisation is also discussed at frequent meetings between enhanced lecturers and the head of standards. Observations lead to action plans that are discussed at annual professional reviews. However, the frequency of follow-up observations following the observation of unsatisfactory teaching is not specified by the college.

The college has introduced a schedule of mock inspections which include lesson observations to add to the effectiveness of the process. To date, four mock inspections have taken place and more are scheduled.

New teachers receive good support from the enhanced lecturers and have ungraded, developmental observations soon after starting teaching. The college has introduced learning sets to promote good teaching. These have included activities on 'advanced teaching and learning practice' and on 'classroom management'. A high proportion of full-time tutors, 96%, are qualified teachers. Taking into account hourly paid sessional lecturers and visiting speakers, only 69% of all teaching staff are qualified. The public services department has very recently introduced student observers but this has not yet impacted upon the college's judgements on the quality of teaching and learning.

What progress has been made in implementing planned improvements to the quality assurance of the tutorial system?	Significant improvement
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Significant improvement has been planned and implemented since the previous inspection. The quality of tutorial materials is monitored by managers and staff. All full-

time learners have a minimum entitlement to a one hour group tutorial each week and 20 minutes individual tutorial each term. Effective tutorial learning sets have taken place where staff have identified and developed good materials and expanded the tutorial curriculum and tutorial frameworks including developing good tutorial schemes of work. Tutorial schemes of work are now present at every level from entry level to level 3. Each scheme of work has been developed along four main themes, pastoral, performance, learning and study skills and advice and guidance and each is mapped to include *Every Child Matters* themes where appropriate. Some schemes of work have been developed with embedded hyperlinks to good resource material. Materials are shared through the virtual learning environment and arrangements for guest speakers to present on a range of topics are good. Staff work well together to share resources and expertise through good practice sessions. The tutorial records recognise and record individual progress and achievement accurately.