

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Harlow College

Date of visit: 21 May 2008

Context

Harlow College is a tertiary college situated in Harlow town centre. 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 underwent a period of significant change after 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 expressed a high level of anxiety about the changes and their effect on students and staff. The college had introduced the new management structure and teaching and learning strategy, and recruited staff to replace those who have left.

At the monitoring visit in September 2007, inspectors judged that there had been some gains to the college, notably in the production of accurate data. However, the high number of new and unqualified staff, insufficient improvements to student outcomes and the variation in quality of curriculum management presented an unacceptably high risk to the quality of education provided by the college. A further monitoring visit to judge the progress the college has made in these areas was deemed necessary by inspectors and carried out in May 2008.

Achievement and standards

Do data demonstrate that the college has made progress in improving outcomes for students studying GCE A and AS levels?	Insufficient progress
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The legacy of staff turbulence is reflected in poor January module results including the low level of high grades. Within these results, there are subjects that performed particularly poorly including areas such as AS mathematics, physics and psychology. However, the previous poor performance of English has been improved with pass rates of over 90% at both levels. The college has taken swift and decisive action on these results, but it is as yet too early to judge their full impact.

Do data demonstrate that the college has made progress in improving outcomes for students studying vocational courses and work-based learning?	Reasonable progress
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Outcomes for other areas of the college demonstrate improvements. In particular, the detailed college data show high in-year retention rates for both age groups. College data on attendance show improvements with an overall attendance percentage of 88% for full-time students and 85% for part time students. In-year retention for adults at level 1, previously an area for improvement, currently stands at 93%. Where early evidence of achievement is available in vocational areas such as carpentry and electrical, there are improved pass rates and proportion of high grades. Outcomes for apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships have improved; markedly so for advanced apprenticeships.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in securing and training adequately experienced and qualified staff to deliver consistently good teaching across the curriculum? In particular, have issues such as large class sizes, clarification of the new tutor role, appropriate training and mentoring of unqualified staff been addressed?	Reasonable progress
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Given the starting point of a large number of new staff with no teaching qualifications, the college has made reasonable progress. Almost all staff have undergone initial teacher training, and plans are well in hand to progress relevant staff to Certificate or Diploma levels. New staff have been well supported in this process, and subject-specific mentors have been allocated and trained, though caseloads vary. However, the extent to which a trainee's workload takes account of the demands of initial teacher training (ITT) courses has yet to be finalised. Arrangements to ensure that trainees receive experience of a range of teaching contexts and levels are variable. The college recognises the need to increase the number of staff delivering initial teacher training to cope with demand.

The college has done much to address the large class sizes noted in the previous visit. More tutors have been appointed, and some classes have been split. The role of new tutors is clear, although roles sometimes overlap with senior tutors in class. The use of daily targets is inconsistent across the college. Often they are well-planned and learning is good as a result; but some classes do not have daily targets. Retention has improved, and whole-day subject sessions have enabled better

monitoring of attendance. Team working has improved as a result of daily early morning team meetings.

Does the lesson observation system supply robust evidence on the quality of teaching and learning? In particular, have the arrangements for the synchronization of formal and informal observations been clarified; the alignment with appraisal arranged and the strategies for monitoring the impact of staff training been developed?	Reasonable progress
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The previous monitoring visit (MV) noted that the lesson observation system was at an early stage of development and had been in place for a very short period of time. The college has now established the system more fully and staff interviewed were very positive about the benefits from such observations. The proportion of good or better teaching as judged by the college has improved; however, there is still too much teaching that is satisfactory. Systematic action planning and monitoring for those teachers awarded inadequate or satisfactory grades have been put into place. All observations are moderated and the college has carried out a useful audit of commonly occurring areas for improvement compared with previous observations. The college recognises that the recording of staff development needs and the clarity of how the impact of staff training is to be measured are areas for further development. Currently, the college has concentrated on the needs of teachers judged to be inadequate and satisfactory and insufficiently on those awarded good or better grades. In the small sample of written records examined, most showed an appropriate focus on learning and students' progress. Not all written records, however, supported fully the grade awarded. The staff organising and carrying out observations are committed and enthusiastic about their tasks and look actively to improve their practice.

Leadership and management

What progress have leaders and managers made in securing consistently good management of curriculum areas? Are the improved data used well to set targets, monitor progress and secure improvements?	Reasonable progress
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The previous MV noted the increased management responsibilities under the new structure of the college and the variation in challenge faced by teams who had lost a number of experienced staff. Managers interviewed continued to demonstrate a high level of commitment and confidence. Most teams are better established and rapid action has been taken where improvements were needed in the organisation and management of learning. Daily meetings are also still seen as useful briefing and communication tools. The college has carried out unannounced Audit Days of teams where all provision is monitored and all lessons observed. This has led to useful action plans and improvements to provision. Evidence suggests that data are accurate and timely. Staff express great confidence in management information, its accessibility and their ability to use it purposefully.

Governors are supportive and well informed. The previous MV noted there was insufficient clarity on how they would monitor the effect of the significant changes in the college. Governors interviewed at this visit demonstrated a clearer understanding of the major issues and their role in monitoring standards.

Students in GCE A level provision still express reservations about the inconsistent quality of teaching. In other areas, students are more positive about target setting and the responsiveness of the college to their concerns.