

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Lowestoft College

Date of visit: 22 April 2008

Context

Lowestoft College is a medium-sized general further education college serving the district of Waveney in north-east Suffolk. The percentage of adults not in work is much higher in Waveney than in Suffolk and nationally and the percentage of school leavers with 5 or more GCSEs at A* to C is much lower. All five high schools in Waveney have sixth forms and there is a sixth form college nearby. The college specialises in vocational education and training. The largest areas of provision include health and public services, engineering, construction, retailing and commercial enterprise, and preparation for life and work. Work-based learning is offered in engineering, construction, hairdressing, hospitality and catering, and business and administration. Vocational courses are provided for increasing numbers of 14 to 16 year olds from local schools. The college has Train to Gain and European Social Fund (ESF) co-financed provision.

The college works with other local colleges in three collaborative centres of vocational excellence (CoVE) in care, construction and 'Skills for Energy'. The college's Maritime Centre attracts international students. The Astral Centre and a CoVE in Offshore Technology run a range of commercial and certificated courses for industry.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made with improving success rates since the last monitoring visit, particularly for adults on courses at level 1?	Significant progress
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In 2006/07 success rates improved from 67% to 74%, broadly in line with the college's target. The success rate on long courses improved from 62% to 68%. For students aged 16 to 18 years the success rate on courses at level 2 improved but at other levels they declined slightly, owing to a slight fall in retention rates. There has been a significant improvement in the success rate for adults on level 1 courses to 63%, which is close to the national average. Both retention and achievement have improved on these courses. Success rates also improved on level 2 courses, but fell slightly at level 3. A feature of the 2006/07 success rates was the much greater consistency between curriculum areas. The success rates on construction courses, a cause for concern previously, improved significantly. The performance of male students improved more overall than female students but the college is aware that the gap in performance, currently 8%, requires continuing close attention. Success rates for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities showed a better rate of improvement than those for students who did not declare a learning difficulty or disability.

The college has placed great emphasis on the development of skills to enhance employability. This policy has been successful, as is demonstrated in the improving success rates on vocational courses, the good key skills results and the success of college students in regional and national competitions. The college fosters and celebrates this success.

Quality of provision

How successful have the college's plans to improve the quality of teaching and learning been since the last monitoring visit?	Significant progress
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The college has developed robust procedures for lesson observation. The relatively small observation team are drawn from different levels of the college's management structure and apply judgements consistently. Moderation procedures are comprehensive. The much improved lesson observation form enables good coverage of developmental points for teachers whilst providing a secure basis by which to identify staff training needs. The assessment of lessons takes account of students' views. All lesson observations are supported by a useful post-observation action plan. The college's current observation profile shows a very high percentage of lessons graded good or better. Teachers recognise and value the support they receive in developing their skills.

The college's sharply focused staff development has underpinned improvements in teaching. Activities have included work on teacher partnerships and expert learning and the use of information and learning technology (ILT) to improve learning is now clearly understood by teachers. The 'Molnet' initiative, by which some 300 students have been provided with 'Smartphones' to record their learning has proved highly effective.

The college employs large and increasing numbers of young teachers who require teacher training. All of these teachers undergo initial teacher training and demonstrate improving teaching skills.

What progress has been made with the setting and monitoring of individual learner targets?	Reasonable progress
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Staff training in target setting has been effective, with teachers now demonstrating a keener understanding of smart targets. The setting of individual targets for students is good but there is some variation between curriculum areas. The recognising and recording of the achievement of 'soft' skills targets is not consistently implemented. Individual learning plans are effective working documents and are used appropriately to record targets. Students are fully aware of what they need to do in order to complete specific aspects of their work. Student reviews take place every four to six weeks and include the setting of relevant targets. Apart from overall success rates the college does not currently monitor progress against individual learning targets.

How effective have the college's plans to fully implement its 'Skills for life' strategy been?	Significant progress
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The appointment of six functional skills advisors, two within each faculty has helped raise the profile and general understanding of the importance of embedding literacy and numeracy in vocational subjects. Staff are becoming more confident in developing communication and application of number in their subjects. Schemes of work and lessons plans now show specific activities related to literacy and numeracy. Employers have been effectively involved through the introduction of key skills in the workplace, with the most recent cohort of students involved achieving an 80% success rate. Course reviews now contain reference to key skills and skills for life but the information varies in quality. There is insufficient reference to the impact on and outcomes for students. The colleges internal system 'Live links' is beginning to have a significant impact on assisting staff in monitoring the overall progress and achievement of students.

Leadership and management

What use is made of data on students' prior attainment?	Reasonable progress
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Since the last monitoring visit the college has revised its procedures for collecting information on students' prior attainment. It currently uses information from at-entry diagnostic testing to identify appropriate targets for individual students. It has now been decided to also collect information on average point scores, which will be compared at entry and on completion of courses for students aged 16 to 18. The college is introducing a new data capture system, based on the existing documentation for the assessment boards and intends to have the new procedures in operation from September 2008. The college has decided on this measure because the majority of courses do not have graded outcomes and it will therefore need to develop its own procedures for collecting data on the overall progress students make in relation to their starting points.