

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Derwentside  
Date of visit: 10 January 2008

### Context

Derwentside College is a small tertiary college established in 1986 to combine the activities of Consett Technical College and the sixth forms of five local schools. It is the major provider of post-16 education and training in the semi-rural district of Derwentside in the north west of County Durham. The college's main campus is in Consett, in new buildings opened in 2002. There are further sites in Stanley and a sixth form centre in Lanchester. The college is organised into four curriculum areas and offers courses in all areas of learning with the exception of land-based industries and construction.

The college operates in a challenging environment. Derwentside is ranked 45<sup>th</sup> out of 354 councils in the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) Indices of Multiple Deprivation. It is an area of small communities, still struggling to regenerate after the decline of the coal and steel industries. Manufacturing remains the largest employment sector and the college has strong links with the engineering industry.

### Achievement and standards

Have improvements in achievements been sustained in 2006/07, and how does the college performance compare to similar institutions?	Reasonable progress
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Student achievement continues to show an improving trend over the last three years. In 2006/07 the overall success rate for the college has been maintained at 81%, which is above the national average for similar colleges. Success rates for students aged 16-18 on long courses at levels 1, 2 and 3 have continued to improve in 2006/07 and are above the national average. This picture is mirrored by success rates for adult students at levels 1, 2 and 3 which are also above national averages. The college is aware that some courses provide poor added value and some learners do not achieve their minimum target grades. The college is also working towards improving the

numbers of students achieving high grade passes in GCSE and GCE A-level courses. In some sector subject areas there is also limited progression from AS to A2 courses.

The overall college attendance at the time of the monitoring visit was 88%. There are satisfactory systems in place to monitor attendance.

What does the most recent achievement data for work-based learners show?	Reasonable progress
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Overall success rates in work-based learning are satisfactory. Success rates show an improving trend, especially for apprentices, in both overall and timely success rates. For advanced apprentices, however, overall success rates have remained static and timely success rates have declined. The overall success rates in engineering are good. In other areas they are generally satisfactory, or the numbers of learners are too low to make a reliable judgement. Train to Gain learners are progressing well and some learners have achieved their qualification earlier than expected.

#### Quality of provision

The college's self-assessment report (SAR) for 2006/07 identified that there was an improving but variable standard of teaching and learning across the college. What action has been taken to address this?	Reasonable progress
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The teaching observation scheme is rigorous and well managed. The college is increasing its use of peer observation to moderate grading and develop observers' skills. Colleagues from another college, acting as consultants, will also become part of this system in the coming year. There is good analysis of the teaching and learning grades, which is used by teams to prepare for curriculum review and self-assessment. Subject learning coaches are beginning to be used to improve under-performance and to share good practice.

Several initiatives have been introduced to improve teaching and learning in work based learning. For example, some staff are undertaking the Certificate in Education; most staff are observed at least once per year; in-house staff training is delivered; and subject learning coaches develop resources to

support teaching and learning and discuss with staff how to make effective use of them.

What has been the impact of changes made to the college structure on the curriculum and learner support areas?	Reasonable progress
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The changes to the structure of the college are beginning to have a positive impact. Curriculum managers report that changes to the structure are improving communication. They also report that linking curriculum and quality management functions enables them to have a clearer focus on self-assessment and review. The restructure has also enabled improvements in information, advice, guidance and admissions to be made. The establishment of the learning development team has brought about a more coherent approach to meeting the needs of all learners. Learners report that they value and benefit from the additional support they receive.

Tutors also report that there is now a clear direction for the college that is shared and understood by staff. There is also a greater understanding of staff roles and responsibilities.

#### Leadership and management

The college's self-assessment report (SAR) for 2006/07 identified that there was some inadequate or inappropriate accommodation; what actions have been taken to address this?	Insufficient progress
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The inspection team noted that the cafeteria was very crowded and that students used the corridors to eat their lunch. There are issues of compliance by the builders that have not been resolved, but the college has worked hard to ensure that this did not have an impact on learners. This issue is now a matter of litigation and is being supported by the Learning and Skills Council's legal team. The college has identified that some teaching accommodation is too small and will use a coming strategic review to address this issue. Staff also report that some classrooms are too small, have no windows and limit the use of information and communication technology.

Learners report there is insufficient space in the canteen; there is no common room; there are no child care facilities; and in some laboratories there is insufficient equipment to demonstrate some experiments.

How has the college addressed the issue of lack of rigour at course level in approach to review and self-assessment in some areas?	Reasonable progress
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The use and understanding of data by all staff has improved. Staff report that they feel better prepared for curriculum review. Curriculum managers have identified areas that lack rigour and are putting in place strategies to improve teams' evaluation and judgemental skills.

A number of actions have also been introduced to more effectively co-ordinate and manage work-based learning programmes. For example, all aspects of the learners' progress are more thoroughly and frequently monitored; staff are able to access performance data more readily; target setting and action planning is more focused for learners; the review process now involves employers; and key skills workshops have been developed to ensure earlier completion. However, many of these actions are relatively new and have yet to have an impact on overall and timely success rates. Other initiatives have been well promoted internally but have yet to be fully embedded, for example, employer engagement.

The college's learner engagement strategy is in its early stages of development. Learners are asked to complete evaluations twice per year. They receive feedback informally from the teaching staff about some changes, but do not receive information from the college. Learners are very positive about the knowledgeable and supportive staff, and the very good information, advice and guidance they receive. Learners are less positive about the canteen, more specifically, the quality and expense of healthy food and insufficient tables available. Some learners were concerned about the impact of progress and achievement of staff who were on long-term sick leave, or where staff had left and not always been replaced. Some full-time learners had not had tutorials, and others felt assignments had not been spaced appropriately across the academic year.