

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Newcastle College (Skelmersdale and Ormskirk College site)

Date of visit: 30 January 2008

Context

Skelmersdale and Ormskirk College is a medium-sized general further education college in the north west of England. It has three main sites, Westbank, the new Construction Academy in Skelmersdale, and Hants Lane in Ormskirk. In 2006/07 the College had just under 5000 learners of whom three quarters were part time. Whilst 80% of all learners were aged 19+, the overwhelming majority of these learners were part time. The 16 -18 year olds constituted 63% of full time learners and over half of all full time equivalents (FTEs). In August 2007 the college merged with Newcastle College. The college offers a range of vocational courses from level 1 to level 3 along with apprenticeships, entry to employment and train to gain courses.

Skelmersdale and its locality have some of the most deprived wards in the country; Ormskirk and rural West Lancashire are more prosperous. The unemployment rate in West Lancashire is above the Lancashire average. In 2006/07 54% of college learners attracted a high widening participation factor. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is higher than in the local population.

The college mission, shared with Newcastle College, is to 'develop people through learning and achievement for the benefit of themselves, society and the economy'. In particular the College aims to:

- put the needs of the learner first
- deliver quality in teaching and learning
- value diversity
- provide great buildings and resources
- value and involve staff
- secure our future through growth and financial stability.

Skelmersdale and Ormskirk College has been reorganised since the merger and there is a new management team. The curriculum is organised into five areas and an employer engagement unit known as "Business Solutions". These are complemented by a number of cross-college service units. There is a degree of central co-ordination but most of the key functions, such as

programme delivery, operational staff development and quality assurance, are devolved to curriculum clusters and services. Strategic management and governance is delivered via Newcastle College. The principal of Skelmersdale and Ormskirk College reports directly to the Chief Executive of Newcastle College. The performance of Skelmersdale College is monitored by the Executive in line with the processes applied to all Newcastle College Schools and Services. The Skelmersdale College advisory committee operates as a committee of the Newcastle College Board and the Chair of that committee is a full member of the Governing Body.

Skelmersdale College was last inspected in May 2006 and was judged to be inadequate. Capacity to improve and leadership and management were judged inadequate. Achievement and standards and quality of provision were judged as satisfactory. In the six curriculum areas inspected, visual and performing arts were inadequate, three areas were satisfactory and two areas were good.

The college's latest self-assessment report (SAR) judges that capacity to improve and leadership and management grades have improved from inadequate to good. Overall effectiveness is judged by the college to now be satisfactory, achievement and standards and quality of provision remain satisfactory. The college grades eight curriculum areas, three as good and the remaining five as satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in reversing the decline in success rates seen in 2006?	Significant Progress
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In 2007 the overall success rate of Skelmersdale and Ormskirk College increased significantly by 11 percentage points to 70% which is broadly in line with the national average. Whilst improved, the success rate of students aged 16-18 remains below the national average. For those aged 19+ success rates increased in 2007 to above the national average. Within this improving trend of increasing success rates there is significant variability in the sector subject areas. The college recognises that key areas for improvement are the success rates for aged 16-18 particularly on level 2 and level 3 courses.

What progress has the college made in improving retention rates, particularly on level 3 courses?	Reasonable Progress
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Although retention on all long courses improved by nine percentage points in 2007 to 77% it still remains below the national average. The increase in

retention on level 3 courses at 3% was well below the college improvements and there are significant variations across different courses. The college has correctly identified retention as a key issue for improvement in its SAR and has in place a comprehensive retention strategy that is being closely monitored by managers. At the time of the visit the in-year retention figure was 97%. This could not be compared to previous years as the data was not available. The data for second year from 2006/07 has yet to be amalgamated into the current management information system (MIS) to give a true reflection of two year course retention.

How much progress has the college made in improving achievement on underperforming courses?	Reasonable Progress
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The overall pass rate improved in 2007 to 91% and is well above the national average. The college has further refined its curriculum offer to meet the needs of the local area and many under performing courses have been withdrawn. The college only offers limited franchise provision in the specialist areas of LLDD and Princes Trust; all other courses are now delivered directly by the college. Curriculum managers meet weekly with their staff to discuss key issues and use data well to set targets and closely monitor their performance. In addition, curriculum managers have a monthly performance review meeting with the principal. It is too soon to judge the full impact of these strategies on achievements.

Quality of provision

How successful are the actions to improve specialist accommodation in construction proved to be?	Significant Progress
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Accommodation is much improved. The new construction academy was opened in September 2007. It is purpose built with spacious workshops and good classroom facilities. Tools and equipment have been improved and IT equipment has been renewed and upgraded. Social areas for students have improved. Students and staff find the new building helps create a good learning environment and they take pride in the new facilities.

With the opening of the new academy additional staff have been recruited and a new head of academy is to take up post in March 2008. The curriculum has expanded and new courses such as motor vehicle and electrical installation have been introduced. Many of the courses, such as plastering, which were only available during the day, have now been made available in the evening. New courses based on a full cost recovery such as gas fitting and energy efficiency have been introduced to meet the employment needs of

the area. Courses in construction are now available at higher levels creating some good progression opportunities. Courses have been introduced at level 3 in advanced construction and plumbing. A new course is about to be offered in heating and ventilation. The construction academy has some good links with local schools and runs a building craft taster course which gives school students good opportunities to develop basic construction skills.

Overall success rates have improved but are still below the national average rates. Significant improvement can be seen in retention overall, however this is better on 19+ courses. Success rates on 16-18 courses have remained the same for the last two years and are below the national average. Pass rates fell on 16-19 courses between 2006/07 with many learners failing to complete their qualification. The college identified that many students were not completing their construction skills certificate scheme (CSCS) certificates which needed to be completed at a different centre. The college have now gained accreditation to offer the CSCS test on college premises.

How successful have the actions been to improve visual and performing arts and the impact on students' achievements?	Significant Progress
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The curriculum offer in visual and performing arts has been revised and the structure of the department enhanced with the employment of four permanent part-time staff and two part-time technicians to support course delivery. Investment in resources has improved the learning environment with a new computer suite, lighting facilities and piano in the theatre and general refurbishment of teaching rooms. Managers use data well to monitor course performance and the teaching team meets weekly to share good practice in teaching and learning. Students enjoy their course and have weekly one to one meetings with their tutor to set targets and monitor their progress. In 2007 pass rates were high but retention remained an issue on many courses. In year retention data for most courses is currently 100%.

What progress have the college made in implementing its new key skills strategies?	Reasonable Progress
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The college has recently reviewed its key skills strategy. A greater emphasis is now placed on making key skills an integral and fundamental part of learning. A greater emphasis has been placed on key skills with more staff deployed in developing key skills across college. Key skills tutors have developed better links with curriculum tutors and assignment and portfolio work is now better linked to the vocational areas. Staff development has taken place to raise awareness within the curriculum areas, to make key skills subject specific and effectively link evidence from a vocational context. Staff

development is also taking place to develop and improve the teaching of key skills. On line testing has now been introduced

Overall success rates for key skills have consistently improved over the last three years and are above national averages. In 2005/06 success rates for 19+ students at 63.5% are much higher than 16-18 students at 45%. The current target is to improve key skills success rates to 70%. Key skills success rates are seen as an area for improvement in the SAR. Staff do not yet have individual targets for improvement in key skills within specific curriculum areas. However a new functional skills co-coordinator post is being advertised to help implement the key skill strategy.

Leadership and management

What further actions have been taken since the merger with Newcastle College to improve the management of resources?	Significant Progress
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Since the merger Skelmersdale College now uses the MIS and management systems in place at Newcastle College and an IT connection cable was put in place in summer 2007. The college now benefits from robust MIS and very clear business planning and risk assessment arrangements. Managers have easy access to current data and use it regularly to monitor performance. The campuses at Skelmersdale and Ormskirk have benefited from significant resource investments to refurbish teaching areas, resource centres and communal social spaces. A new construction centre has been built in the centre of Skelmersdale. A strategy to increase the number of permanent staff has led to the appointment of around 40 new staff. The college is in line to meet its funding targets for 2007/08. The college is in the process of submitting plans for an ambitious new building for 2010 and is a key player in the regeneration of Skelmersdale. The attendance to the newly established Skelmersdale College advisory committee, which operates as a committee of the Newcastle College Board, has been sporadic. The principal is working with the Chair of the committee, who is a full member of the Newcastle College governing body, to try and improve commitment of members to attend regularly.

What progress has the college made in its reorganisation of employer engagement (work based learning, train to gain and E2E) and how successful has this been?	Significant Progress
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The new employer engagement arm of the college 'Business Solutions' came into existence in October 2007. During 2006/07 the colleges work based learning (WBL) and E2E provision was devolved to a private provider, Training

West Lancashire (TWL). The provision is now with the college and falls within the remit of Business Solutions. The E2E provision which was originally delivered off campus has now been accommodated on the main site with much improved classrooms and teaching resources. Currently 599 learners are following WBL programmes.

A small team of four employer engagement staff work with employers to identify training opportunities. Since October 2007 a train to gain contract has been introduced with currently 30 learners following this programme with a further 120 about to start. Good links have been made with employers locally and several individually tailored courses have been developed, for example, fork lift truck driving, to meet local employer needs. Since October 2007 the college have managed to re-engage with local agencies in the community. New marketing materials have been produced and there is strong focus on promoting the work based programmes with employers, students, staff and the community as a whole.

The college has liaised with LSC to clarify historical WBL performance data for 2006/07. Currently overall success rates on WBL programmes is 75% with a positive progression rate for E2E of 83%. No earlier data is available for WBL, therefore no trends can be identified as to whether the college's position has improved.

The Contracts and Performance team identified some concerns with contract compliance when the provision was returned to the college. New processes have been put in place to ensure that more rigorous audits take place of WBL documentation. A new management information system is being developed for WBL to give better opportunities for analysis and forward planning.