

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Doncaster College

Date of visit: 2 July 2008

### Context

Doncaster College is a large general further education college in the metropolitan borough of Doncaster. Doncaster is the largest metropolitan borough, by geographical area, in the country. It has experienced considerable social and economic decline over recent years and unemployment is high in some of the borough's wards. In spite of significant recent inward investment, Doncaster is still one of the most deprived local authorities in England. In 2007, the proportion of pupils from the borough gaining five or more GCSE grades at A\*-C was 57.6% in comparison to the national average of 60.9%.

The main campus of the college is the new waterfront development in the centre of Doncaster, 'The Hub', which opened in September 2006. The University Centre, Doncaster is the college's second campus which is set in countryside at High Melton, six miles west of Doncaster. The college is the major provider of post-compulsory education for the 290,000 residents of Doncaster and is a regional and national centre for a number of specialist courses. It offers programmes from foundation to postgraduate degree level. Further education courses are provided in all of the 15 sector subject areas. According to college data in 2006/07, 17,894 further education learners, 477 work-based learners and 796 full-time equivalent higher education students were enrolled. The majority of learners live in Doncaster. Some 8% were from minority ethnic groups which is higher than the local average of 3.5%.

### Previous inspection

Doncaster College was last inspected in June 2007 and was inadequate for effectiveness of provision, achievement and standards, leadership and management and capacity to improve. The quality of provision was satisfactory, as was equality of opportunity. The sector subject areas were satisfactory, with the exception of engineering, which was inadequate, and health, care and public services, which was good.

This is the first monitoring visit following the June 2007 inspection.

## Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made in improving success rates, particularly for learners aged 16-18?	Reasonable progress
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The college has taken a range of steps to improve the low success rates, particularly for learners aged 16-18. Firstly the college has made the decision to withdraw from A level provision and no longer offers learndirect. Other steps taken include: direct involvement of the principal in monitoring performance, celebrating good practice and identifying and taking action to eradicate weak areas, targeting areas with success rates of 60% or below, issuing internal notices to improve and greater use of learning mentors, now called retention officers.

The introduction of quarterly course reviews has enabled curriculum teams to identify issues sooner. For example, students at risk of not achieving are identified much earlier, have their progress tracked and monitored closely and are often referred to retention officers for extra advice and help. In addition the college has a stronger focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning, improved management information, better use of data to track and monitor learners' progress, and an increase in the number of learners receiving additional learning support.

Although it is too soon to assess improvements in success rates because of the timing of the visit, college data show that these initiatives have had a positive impact. Overall retention has improved by 2% in the current year and this includes all the 'legacy' courses from the previous inspection. If these learners are 'stripped out', current retention has increased by five points to 79%. For learners aged 16-18 (without GCE A level) retention has improved by 10% to 84% in the year, 2007/08. Using all available data college projections indicate that success rates will increase in many areas. For example success rates in engineering will increase, from 48% in 2006/07 to 57% in 2007/08 and in construction from 61% to 68%. In the arts curriculum area success rates are anticipated to rise by 10%.

## Quality of provision

How successful have managers been in improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly the use of information learning technology?	Reasonable progress
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The college has put in place a wide range of strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning. For example, lesson observation training has been provided to curriculum managers, lesson observations graded as unsatisfactory are followed up with an action plan and re-observation, and lesson observation pro-forma have been revised and are linked to a software package that provides a useful analysis of outcomes of teaching and learning so that training needs can be identified. A teaching and learning 'task' group, that includes the principal and other senior managers, has been set up and best practice is more widely shared.

A series of staff development opportunities have been offered, aimed at increasing the pedagogical use of ILT and initial problems in the system have been resolved. Additional resources have been targeted at specific areas such as motor vehicle maintenance. An increasing amount of materials is available on the virtual learning environment and students use of it has increased.

College data shows that the proportion of good or better lessons has increased and the percentage of those graded unsatisfactory has markedly reduced. This includes significant improvements in specifically targeted areas of concern.

What progress has been made in increasing the uptake of additional learning support?	Reasonable progress
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The profile of additional learning support has been raised across the college. Secure plans to improve and expand additional learning support provision are in place, well supported by senior management, and several new staff have been appointed including a course leader for dyslexic provision. A regular cycle of monthly meetings has been set up between additional learning support managers and skills tutors: key skills, basic skills, support champions and the vice principal, to monitor accept progress against actions. Several courses, including ones in engineering and construction have begun to access language, literacy and numeracy support which has contributed towards improving retention and success. College data to date indicates an overall improvement in the take-up of support. It also shows an increase in retention of those accessing support.

A new, dedicated initial assessment suite has been set up and staff have been trained on the process. Initial assessment is being used to identify levels of literacy, language and numeracy to ensure students enrol on the most appropriate level of course. Training is available for all admissions tutors in vocational areas to ensure they are familiar with the new initial assessment process and how to use the information on guidance interviews. Initial and diagnostic assessment results are easily available to all staff to ensure they all have access to students' additional learning needs. To date 1,588 students have accessed initial assessment, compared with 40 at the comparable date in 2006/07. As these assessments relate mainly to students who will access courses in the next academic year their full impact will not be apparent until 2008/09.

What progress has been made in improving the setting and monitoring of targets for learners?	Reasonable progress
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Since the inspection last summer the format and policy for delivery of individual learning plans has been agreed to ensure consistency of approach in 2007/08. Training on SMART target-setting has taken place across the college, with guidance included in the tutorial handbook. A 'good practice' group has been established which carries out quality audits of individual learning plans, especially in relation to SMART targets. Further development of the format is planned for 2008/09, including the use of a common 'off site' format and the management of individual learning plans is included in the job descriptions of the new Academy Heads. Guidance on the plans

will be included in the college quality manual that is currently being revised. Much more reliable data is available to use in the individual learning plans and students feel the targets are more challenging and support them in improving their work.

What progress has been made in improving the consistency of group tutorials?	Reasonable progress
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The college has been working on a number of strategies to improve the consistency of the group tutorial. Firstly it has developed an academic tutorial policy and established a student entitlement for academic tutorials for both full- and part-time learners. A generic scheme of work and changes to staffing now ensures a more consistent yet flexible approach. An induction handbook has been disseminated across the college and lesson observations have been completed to ensure consistency of delivery. Materials have been developed on the virtual learning environment and many resources have been added.

In monitoring the impact of these changes college data shows that attendance at personal and professional development sessions has improved to 85%. In addition observations of teaching and learning identify 92% of tutorials as good or better.

#### Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the effectiveness of governors in monitoring provision?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection the governing body has been reconfigured. Governors now have a clear view of the strategic direction of the college and place the learner at the heart of what the college does. Meetings are held monthly and have standing items that relate to key issues. The quality and curriculum committee has been subsumed within the cycle of monthly Coporation Board meetings and related issues are at the core of the board's work. The college has a much stronger focus on monitoring performance data, such as student retention and attendance, and governors have a much better understanding of data and targets. Minutes record a full account of the topics covered, reflect the questioning that takes place and demonstrate appropriate follow up actions. Meetings are shorter but much more productive. All decisions are considered in light of how they will impact on students' learning and achievement. Governors are aware they have further to go and are working on bringing new governors up to speed and in forming links with curriculum areas. It is too early to measure the effectiveness of all the changes that have taken place but early indications are positive.

What progress has been made in improving the co-ordination of work-based learning and the consistency of courses?	Reasonable progress
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The profile of work-based learning has been raised and the college provides a great deal of support for developments in this area. As part of the restructure of the

college an Academy of Workforce Development has been put in place, which has an overall co-ordinating role. Workforce development co-ordinators are employed in most vocational area and feed in to the Academy and manage work-based learning in their vocational areas. The use of electronic systems to monitor and track progress is much more systematic. Regular reviews and reports enable staff to identify learners 'at risk' and put in place appropriate intervention strategies. These developments are already having a positive impact but have only recently been put in place and so it is too early to measure their success.

Communication between staff and the sharing of good practice has improved. All areas have service level agreements with a generic section and then an area specific action plan. The number of assessors has been increased in most areas and they have been given a clearer focus on their role. However, there are some areas where the extra assessors are very new or have yet to take up their post. All areas can demonstrate a positive impact following the changes on success rates and relationships with employers.

Is provision in those areas graded inadequate improving?	Reasonable progress
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Three areas were graded unsatisfactory at the previous inspection, engineering, A levels and learndirect. The college no longer offers learndirect provision and has made the decision to stop offering A level courses. In engineering a wide range of strategies has been put in place to improve all aspects of provision and improvements are already apparent. Student retention has increased and the profile of lesson observations has improved.

The college graded a number of other areas as inadequate in its 2006/07 self-assessment report and is making progress in improving provision in all of them. A range of strategies has been used to improve areas, targeting the specific issues they have. For example information and communications technology provision has been integrated with other forms of provision. The information and communication technology academy has completed a full review and a new programme manager has been appointed. The rationale for enrolling students on key skills courses has been revised to ensure a better fit to learning and support needs. The new course review process has been used effectively to identify potential problems at course level and to monitor progress in resolving them. Although it is too soon to measure the success of many initiatives, evidence such as the improving retention and lesson observation profile, show a positive effect to date.

How successful have managers been in improving the effectiveness of self-assessment and quality improvement processes, including the use of management information?	Reasonable progress
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The effectiveness of the self-assessment and quality improvement processes has been improved. The course review process has had a major role to play here and,

although the process has only been in place for a year and is still developing, its positive effects can be clearly seen. The college has a much stronger focus on accountability at all levels with issues and 'at risk' learners identified much earlier so intervention strategies can be put in place and their effectiveness monitored. Managers are aware of any points of concern in their area, the need to show how they are resolving them, and the impact their strategies are having. A recent impact analysis has been used as a method of highlighting issues that need to be resolved and of sharing good practice.

The understanding and use of management information has improved. Data is highly accurate and provides an effective tool in a whole range of college processes from monitoring intervention strategies to course planning for future years. Course reviews and the 2007/08 self-assessment report are now pre-populated with appropriate data enabling managers to focus on analysis and evaluation. A wide range of data reports are produced, are easily available and staff can ask for bespoke reports to fit particular circumstances. Management information has been used to identify provision with success rates of below 60% and meetings have been held to discuss the future of these courses, either putting support strategies in place or looking for appropriate alternatives.

Although the positive effects of many of these strategies can be seen it is too early to measure their success due to the limited time they have been in place.

What progress is being made as a result of action taken by managers to resolve an inadequate capacity to improve?	Reasonable progress
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The new principal, who took up his post in December 2007, has made a number of key decisions which have helped to refocus the college on its priorities. Progress is being made in all the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection and positive impact on learners is apparent. Staff are working together well to bring about improvements. The college has a strong culture of accountability and a much greater use of management information to support judgements and formulate effective intervention strategies. Retention and attendance have improved. Quality improvement developments, such as the course review process are being used well and are highly valued by staff. The increased focus on teaching and learning is reflected in the improving grade profile for teaching and learning observations. Initiatives to increase additional learning support staff and target-setting for learners are beginning to have an impact. However a number of initiatives have only been in place for a short time, are being piloted or are planned for next year so it is too early to assess their effectiveness. In addition the college is only part way through the implementation of a new structure.