

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Harlow College
Date of visit: 13 November 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. 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 has 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 was making in these areas was deemed necessary by inspectors and was carried out in May 2008.

The outcomes of the May monitoring visit were more positive. The remaining area of significant concern was the provision of GCE A and AS levels where 'insufficient progress' was judged to have been made. However, all other areas were judged to

have made reasonable progress. A further monitoring visit was scheduled for November 2008 in order to monitor further developments.

Achievement and standards

Does data demonstrate that the college has made progress in improving outcomes for students studying vocational courses?	Significant progress
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The majority of students are studying vocational courses. College data show that overall success rates for vocational courses for both age groups and at all three levels have improved sharply in 2007/08. In particular, the steady increase of success rates for the substantial number of students studying national diplomas has been continued to well above average. Success rates in national vocational qualifications (NVQs) are significantly above average with the exception of the smaller number of adults studying Level 3 NVQs. Vocational courses classified under 'other' in the college performance report all show significantly improved success rates taking them to well above average.

Does 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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College data for 2007/08 show the continued legacy of previous turbulence in this area with a slight fall in GCE A level success rates to 92%. Success rates at AS levels are static and remain well below the sixth form college average. The proportion of high grades is low at both levels and value-added is generally poor. Progression rates between AS levels and GCE A levels are too low. Within the overall success rates there are areas of particularly poor performance including mathematics results at both GCE A and AS level. Better performing subjects include GCE A level English. The college is keenly aware of the need to secure improvements in this area and are exploring strategies including partnership arrangements with local schools and a revised timing for AS level examinations. New management of the area includes a vice-principal taking direct management responsibility for GCE A and AS level provision.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in employer engagement and outcomes in work-based learning?	Reasonable progress
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The new Employer Responsiveness Unit (ERU) set up in August 2008 to improve employer engagement and oversee work-related initiatives, is already having an impact. A range of policies and procedures to guide the work of the new ERU and the growing Train to Gain contract has been drafted. A new business development executive has been recruited with a focus on cementing relationships with existing

employers and expanding the provision. A database of employers who have contracted work with the college in 2007/08 has been set up and a customer relationship management system is being developed.

The appointment of a data manager has improved the quality of data gathered. The college monitors success rates closely for its own work-based learning provision and for members of the APEX consortium. Subsequently, a range of initiatives are being implemented to support the APEX work-based learning consortium members. The college has introduced 'notices to improve' where performance is low. Monthly performance reviews monitor progress against quality improvement plans and target success rates effectively. The college's success rates in the large Train to Gain programme have been good with the exception of engineering and manufacturing technology at level 3. However, the picture is mixed in work-based learning for young people. Although success rates have improved from below average to broadly average in most subject sector areas; success rates are poor in health and social care, business administration, retail and commercial enterprise and engineering and manufacturing.

What progress has been made in securing and training adequately experienced and qualified staff to deliver consistently good teaching across the curriculum?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous monitoring visit, the college had made reasonable progress towards reducing the number of unqualified staff. This work continues and the college has further reduced the number of unqualified teaching staff. The procedures to appoint new teachers meet safe recruitment practices satisfactorily, including the completion of a Criminal Records Bureau check. The management of initial teacher training and responsibility for staff development now rests with a single senior member of staff. New teachers receive a satisfactory induction into college systems and a good range of in-house staff development and training is accessed by all staff.

The development of the mentoring role with subject specific mentors continues to play a significant part in supporting new teachers. Team working remains strong, supported by the daily early morning meeting. However, the quality of individual daily targets remains variable. In the better examples, targets relate closely to the knowledge and skills students need to develop further. They prioritise tasks and colour code the stage they are at. Staff can see at a glance where the student has self-assessed and can support further development well. In other lessons, students receive generic targets or select from whole group targets devised by the teacher. Some students do not understand their targets fully or how to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the subject covered in the lesson.

Does the lesson observation system supply robust evidence on the quality of teaching and learning? In	Reasonable progress
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particular, has the recording and monitoring of all staff training and development needs and the impact of actions been improved?	
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The documentation used for lesson observation has been improved and the recording of staff training needs for all teachers observed has been implemented. A robust moderation system includes a written commentary and the recording of the quality of the observation. The proportion of teaching judged to be good or better has improved, but a significant proportion is still judged as satisfactory rather than good. The new documentation records useful data with which to compare outcomes by features such as level and mode of study, but this information is currently under-used.

The written records examined have a greater emphasis on the learning and progress of students and provide a detailed account of the lesson. The college has introduced into its documentation a useful summing up of the main judgements through bullet points. However, the writing of evaluative and accurate bullet points remains an area for further development. Staff interviewed were positive about the benefits of both formal and informal observations. The sharing of good practice has been improved and staff interviewed speak positively about their ability to observe and be observed for this purpose.

Leadership and management

What further progress have leaders and managers made in securing consistently good management in all curriculum areas?	Reasonable progress
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The college continues to implement stringent quality procedures. Unannounced audit days provide an overview of provision and courses identified as 'at risk' are monitored weekly. Senior academy managers have been appointed with the specific task of supporting targeted improvement. The self-assessment process is at an early stage, but the summary curriculum area self-assessment reports provide evidence based on success rates and the outcomes of lesson observation. However, a few areas are designated provisionally as unsatisfactory due often to the impact of poor GCE A and AS levels. The impact of staff changes had a variable effect and in some areas managers remain relatively inexperienced. Extensive support structures are now in place but have not yet prevented GCE A and AS levels failing to make sufficient progress. In contrast, the larger vocational area has made significant progress in improving outcomes.

Managers interviewed are very supportive of college strategies and confident in their eventual success. Teachers interviewed supported the strategy of setting daily targets and commented on improved teamwork and the continued usefulness of daily meetings.

Data and the use of data are strong. Managers and teachers express confidence in their accuracy and their ability to use them to judge the quality of provision. Governors interviewed are well-informed about strengths and areas for improvement in success rates and remain supportive of the changes that have taken place at the college. In particular, they demonstrate a good knowledge of future developments in Train to Gain and employer engagement.

Student Feedback

Elections for both the Student Union and Student Council have been held very recently. Newly elected representatives were among the group of students interviewed formally. The students interviewed were more positive about daily targets than has been the case previously and stated that they are used well and provide them with a picture of where they are and how well they are doing. Induction was described as effective with new students settling quickly and making new friends. The newly instituted learner representative meetings were seen as a useful communication and improvement tool.