MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Burton College

Date of visit: 2 October 2008

Context

Burton College is a medium-sized general further education (GFE) college serving Burton upon Trent, East Staffordshire and South Derbyshire. The college has premises at Shobnall Sports Centre, learning shops in Burton town centre and Uttoxeter, and a specialist information and communication technology (ICT) centre in Burton. In addition, the college makes extensive use of specialist performing arts facilities at a nearby community venue. The college has two centres of vocational excellence (CoVE) in construction and in advanced manufacturing.

Burton College delivers programmes of learning in all sector subject areas. Provision ranges from pre-16, to higher education (HE), including adult and community learning (ACL), work-based learning, employer specific training and learndirect provision. During 2007/08 the college enrolled 3,459 full-time equivalent LSC funded learners with 2,583 full-time and 3,166 part-time learners. Over half of all learners were aged 16 to 18 years; 434 trainees started work-based learning programmes; and around 400 learners participated in the increased flexibility programme at Key Stage 4. ACL provision included 1,058 learners and learndirect had 155 learners. In 2007/08, 13% of learners were from minority ethnic groupings, compared with East Staffordshire's population of around 6%. Around 60% of learners are female and around a quarter of learners are working towards skills for life targets.

The college's mission states "Burton College will continue to provide a diverse and flexible range of good quality education and training programmes to meet the needs of individuals, companies and the wider community".

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in raising success rates overall?	Reasonable Progress

The success rate for learners aged 16-18 on long qualifications in 2006/07 was above the national average, retention was below and achievement was well above. This represents an upward trend. On Levels 1 and 3 qualifications, the success rates were above national averages and at Level 2 the success rate was at the national average. The success rate for adult learners aged 19 and over was around the national average, with retention well below and achievement well above the national averages. Success rates for adults have been variable over the last 3 years, falling significantly in 2005/06. Success rates were well below national average on Level 2 courses, especially on ICT courses in the learning shops and centres.

At the time of the monitoring visit, data for 2007/08 are not yet finalised. Early indications show a continuing improvement in success and retention rates amongst 16-18 year old learners. It is too early to judge adult success or retention rates overall. However, on Level 2 programmes which were identified as requiring improvement at the previous inspection, both success and retention rates are known to be below the 2006/07 national averages. Changes have been made to the curriculum offer for new learners in learning centres but continuing learners underachieve.

The quality improvement plan identified an unacceptable variation between subjects at GCE A and AS Level in 2006/07. In all areas of underperformance an improvement action plan was agreed and outcomes in 2007/08 have shown a significant improvement to success rates above previous national averages.

The success and retention rates on very short skills for life courses for adults, which were an area for improvement at the previous inspection, have improved significantly. Managers have tailored courses more closely to employer and individual needs and monitor the progress of adult learners more closely.

According to college data, the overall and timely success rates of advanced apprentices have improved in 2007/08 and are above 2006/07 national averages. The overall success rate of apprentices is static and the timely rate has improved marginally in 2007/08; both rates are around the 2006/07 national averages.

What progress has the college made in improving achievement of key skills	Reasonable Progress

Since inspection, the college has developed a clear plan of action for the development of key skills provision within the college. Data for 2006/07 finalised after the inspection showed that the overall success rate for key skills improved significantly between 2005/06 and 2006/07 to above the national average. However, success rates still vary considerably across the qualification range and although improved on most courses they remain low on Level 3 communication and application of number and have declined from 2005/06 on Level 1 communication and ICT courses. Success rates are analysed by the college and demonstrate that learners' performance in key skills is better when key skills are fully embedded programmes. The college is embedding key skills into 5 vocational curriculum areas from September 2008. Extensive staff development and training to improve the skills of teaching and support staff in delivering embedded key skills are underway.

What progress has the college made in improving satisfactory levels of attendance	Reasonable Progress

College attendance has improved since inspection, for both 16-18 year old learners and adults. Managers monitor absences, especially those of full-time learners, more closely. The college is investigating methods of contacting and supporting non-attending adults on part time programmes to enable them to complete their programmes.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in promoting equality and diversity within the curriculum	Reasonable Progress

The college's equality and diversity group includes representatives from each curriculum area. This group is encouraging the promotion of equality and diversity through a variety of means. The college has raised the visual awareness of equality and diversity within college buildings; for example though posters, displays and celebration of cultural diversity and history. Several innovative awareness-raising sessions have been organised for staff, which challenge preconceived views of race. Further sessions have investigated physical and gender differences and implications on learning.

Staff are encouraged to promote equality and diversity within their lesson plans and schemes of work and interesting examples are evident; for example, one visual arts learner has reached the final of a national competition, celebrating a black author's work. The college intends to assess the scope and impact of changes through the lesson observation process and through an audit of schemes of work which is imminent.

What progress has the college made in addressing inconsistencies in marking and individual learning plans	Reasonable Progress

Improved tutorial arrangements are now more embedded in practice and learners are allocated more time for one-to-one meetings with personal tutors. Learners are more involved in setting targets for achievement contained within the individual learning plan and progress is monitored more closely. Personal tutors are asked to comment on progress, including value added information, where learners are achieving challenging targets over and above expectations. Tutorial co-ordinators have very recently started to conduct audits of tutorial documentation which include monitoring the quality of target-setting. Useful feedback is given to tutors to improve the effective use of the individual learning plan within tutorials.

Learners obtain more immediate feedback about the quality of completed assignments and new targets are set to address any issues which arise through marking. Initiatives have taken place to improve the quality of marking which include more standardisation of assessment through sharing of good practice amongst staff.

Tutors report that retention of learners has improved due to improvements made to the individual learning plan and closer monitoring of progress. Early indications are that for 2007/08 retention has improved for 16-18 year old learners. Although improved initiatives are being implemented to monitor and support adult learners' progress the impact of these is not yet being demonstrated in retention or success rates.

Leadership and management

How is college management continuing to drive improvement and raise standards?	Reasonable Progress

The college has continued to develop a range of monitoring arrangements. This includes faculty health checks and course review processes. The system for supporting and monitoring underperforming courses has been strengthened to ensure more timely intervention.

Within work-based learning, several changes in management processes have been implemented. As with all programmes, key performance indicators are agreed, and the learner monitoring system is fully established across all those involved in training and assessment. It is too early to judge the impact of changes on timely success rates.

The college is in the process of publishing a teaching, learning and assessment strategy to provide staff with a framework to ensure a consistently high quality service. The strategy is supported by a wide range of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities in teaching and learning. The CPD programme since inspection and for 2008/09 reflects the priorities highlighted at inspection.

The lesson observation process has been refined for 2008/09 to assess the impact of the teaching, learning and assessment strategy and of CPD. There has been further training of members of the observation team to ensure rigour and consistency. The system will enable analysis of the age and level of learners so facilitating closer targeting of improvement initiatives to different learners' groups.

The impact of recent changes in strategy is also assessed through learners' questionnaires. The college is part of an external benchmarking system; comparative feedback from learners on teaching and learning is positive.

The college leads a peer review group across 4 further education providers. In May 2008, a team of managers from partner colleges investigated the adult learner journey at Burton College and made a series of recommendations which are being introduced over a twelve month period. This new focus on the needs of adult learners has the potential to improve their retention and achievement rates although it is too early to judge impact.

Additionally, the college instigated and leads a group of five colleges who work together to highlight and implement best practice. Amongst the developments arising from this group have been: the development of an on-line project management package to monitor achievement of college development plans; the development of an online package to allow managers at all levels throughout the college to monitor key performance indicators; improvement to lesson observation processes and support mechanisms for underperforming members of teaching staff. The impact of these changes has not been assessed on this visit.