MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Grantham College

Date of visit: 25 and 26 November 2008

Context

Grantham College is a general further education (GFE) college in Lincolnshire. In 2007/08 the college had 7,632 learner enrolments, of which 3,370 were aged 16 to 18 and 4,155 were adult learners. There are currently 257 work-based learning (WBL) enrolments. The college is also involved in contracts for Train to Gain. The college offers provisions in 14 out of the 15 Learning and Skills Council (LSC) sector subject areas. The college has recently introduced automotive training to the curriculum offer.

The college mission statement and strategic priorities were revised during 2007/08 to better reflect its aspirations to be outstanding. The college mission is now 'to provide high quality education and training for the benefit of all'.

Achievement and standards

At the last monitoring visit success rates for students aged 16 to 18 had improved to be broadly in line with the national average. Does the college's 2008 data suggest this improvement has continued?	Significant progress

College data for 2007/08 show a marked rise in the overall long success rate for learners aged 16 to 18, from 73% to 80%, to above the national average, with improvements seen in both retention and pass rates. Success rates improved at all levels, most significantly at Level 2, where it rose by 13 percentage points, well above the most recent national average.

The improvement is predominantly but not solely down to a notable improvement in NVQ outcomes at all levels. NVQ success rates remain high at Level 1, improved from well below average Level 2 to be broadly average and although improved markedly by 23 percentage points at Level 3, the success rate remains below average.

College data show most subject sector areas improved in 2007/08 and all are now broadly at or above national average. Success rates were particularly high in engineering, construction, leisure, travel and tourism and social sciences.

College in-year retention data indicate the trend in improvement seen in 2007/08 is likely to be at least maintained, although it is too early to judge the full impact on learners' overall success rates. Overall attendance of part and full time students has remained high in 2007/08 at 91%.

How successful has the college been in 2008 in improving the previous low success rate for adults at all levels?	Reasonable progress

The overall success rate for adult learners on long programmes improved notably from 51% to 66%, although remains below the national average. Again, success rates improved at all levels in 2007/08 with some notable improvements in pass and retention rates.

Success rates improved most at Levels 2 and 3 and are broadly average. However, at Level 1, despite improvement, success rates at this level remain unsatisfactory and a key focus for improvement. This is mainly owing to the very low success rates on English speakers of other languages (ESOL) and information communication technology (ICT) programmes which remain areas of consistent underperformance. The college recognises that actions taken to improve outcomes for learners in these areas have been slow. The overall number of enrolments has fallen significantly over the last three years. This academic year it has strengthened the monitoring of these programmes and is further improving the appropriateness of the curriculum. In-year retention rates on these programmes were high at the time of the monitoring visit but it is too early to judge the full impact on success rates.

Again the overall improvement is predominately owing to improved success rates on NVQ programmes from well below average to above at all levels, most significantly at Level 2. College data show all sector subject areas improved in 2007/08 and were at or above the national average with the exception of ICT and preparation for life and work which remained well below. Overall 19+ success rates for engineering, business, leisure, travel and tourism, and arts and media were well above national averages.

At the previous inspection the achievement of frameworks for work based learners was good and improving. Are success rates continuing to improve and remain above national averages?	Reasonable progress

Success rates on apprenticeship programmes have improved in the two years since the previous inspection and are at 62% for the current year. Improvements in the rates of timely completion have been greater, rising from 57% in 2006/07 to 62% in 2007/08. Overall success and timely success rates on NVQ only programmes are high.

Overall success and timely success rates for the small number of advanced apprentices have declined slightly but remained good for the last two years. The number of learners on apprenticeship programmes is declining and some programmes in care are being discontinued.

The college has recently won a direct LSC contract to provide Train to Gain (T2G) programmes. Previously the college contributed to a consortium of T2G providers led by another local college. There was insufficient data at the time of the monitoring visit to make a secure judgement about the effectiveness of this new provision.

Quality of provision

How effectively is the college increasing the proportion of good or better lessons and ensuring there is regular sharing of best teaching and formative assessment practice?	Reasonable progress

The college has introduced and revised a number of quality improvement arrangements, many of which focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Regular observations of teaching and learning are carried out.

Support is provided by a team of five 'quality learning leaders' for those teaching staff whose lessons are judged to be unsatisfactory. The Quality Learning Leaders team have designed and delivered a series of staff development events and learning resources about improving teaching and learning. Satisfactory lessons are not currently re-observed as part of the formal observation process.

A pilot "Teaching triangle" project has been run in which small groups of staff to carry out peer reviews of teaching and identify areas of good practice. Examples of good practice are shared and validated in a series of cross-college curriculum good practice groups.

Senior managers have recently raised the profile of teaching and learning by beginning a schedule of short lesson visits during which they make informal judgements on aspects of teaching and learning including learning resources.

Of those observations carried in the current year approximately three quarters were judged to be good, or better with a small proportion unsatisfactory. However, the college has yet to complete its annual cycle of observations of teaching and learning in order to fully evaluate the effectiveness of the new arrangements.

What progress has been made in ensuring adult programmes and provision for part-time learners is cohesively planned and developed. Can we see any trends of improvement?	Significant progress

Communication and cooperative working is good across the college regarding provision for adult learners. Staff from curriculum areas and YES meet regularly to share information about local employer needs and examples of good practice.

The range of college provision was altered to reflect more accurately the needs of learners and changing local priorities. The number of accredited courses offered has been reduced. New provision has been developed in retail and warehousing and storage to meet the needs of the local population. The college has recently won a contract from the local authority to offer personal and community learning development (PCDL) programmes.

Adult learners now undertake initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills on enrolment and are offered appropriate support. An adult student tutor has been appointed to improve access to support. Initial advice and guidance is effective in directing those returning to learning to appropriate programmes. Retention rates have improved markedly in 2007/08. However, some pre-enrolment information and induction arrangements are insufficiently communicated and reinforced for adult and part time learners.

Leadership and management

How well is the college using data and data analysis, including value added data, to inform decision making and set challenging targets?	Reasonable progress

Staff make good use of available data to monitor the performance of courses and individual learners. They receive monthly reports about rates of attendance, retention, success and individual learner progress. Curriculum self-assessment reports are more data rich and consider high graded and value added where appropriate. However, the college have been slow to introduce the analysis of performance data and trends by different groups at curriculum and course level. Consequently, there is little specific target setting for increasing learner participation or improving learner outcomes by gender, ethnicity or age. Target setting within the equalities action plans at whole college level is imprecise.

Staff have a good working knowledge of their performance and use these reports during regular monthly meetings and annual appraisals with their managers to monitor performance against agreed targets. Individual targets for improvement are agreed during staff appraisals. However, some are insufficiently challenging and simply reflect the expected improvement in national averages.

Analysis of exit interviews with learners has been used to agree a number of strategies to improve retention rates. Retention rates improved notably in 2007/08.

What progress has been made in promoting equality and diversity in response to equalities legislation?	Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection and in response to disability legislation, the college has worked rapidly to increase accessibility for wheelchair users across the site. All buildings now have wheelchair access and automatic doors and some additional facilities have been put in place to meet specific needs such as female toilets within engineering department.

Much work has been undertaken in the last year to raise the profile of equality and diversity across the college, such as the revision of a strategic equalities group and sub-committee to improve monitoring and cross-college

promotion. The reporting on different groups of learners is more comprehensive than in previous years and effectively analyses the feedback of different groups of learners. However, the analysis and reporting on the performance of different groups of learners is insufficiently rigorous and an area for improvement and has yet to be sufficiently embedded at all levels and within the curriculum. For example, the college does not include in its analysis of different groups the performance of learners identified as 'White other', the college's largest minority group, whose success rates are well below average and are on a declining trend. This therefore, was not identified as an area for improvement in the college self-assessment report.

A single equality scheme has been drafted and is in the process of consultation. Policies for diversity and gender are in place and are published on the college intranet, along with the college's diversity report. The college website has been recently revised and key equalities data is being made accessible on the internet. The college recognise equality impact assessments are underdeveloped and in response, all college policies received an initial screening and 16 members of staff have received training to pursue this work with further staff training planned.

How effective are the college's arrangements for safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults including the training of all college staff in child protection?	Reasonable progress

The college has a clear policy and procedure for the safeguarding of young people and vulnerable adults. Virtually all permanent staff and around 83% of hourly paid academic staff have now received child protection awareness training. The college is undertaking additional accredited on-line awareness training with all full-time staff through a rolling programme of staff development with plans to expand this to all part-time staff.

All college staff receive an enhanced CRB check and although governors are not currently included, this is planned to take place in 2008/09. All child protection information is held centrally and monitored within the human resources department although this information is not yet clearly located on a single format.

The college has enhanced its security of the main site to provide a safe and welcoming learning environment. This is confirmed by the very positive responses to annual student and staff surveys on the theme of 'staying safe'.

What improvements have been made to ensure governors are more rigorous in the monitoring the quality of college provision?	Reasonable progress

Governors have increased the rigour by which they monitor the quality of the college's provision. There are now separate committees for overseeing the college's finance and the quality of provision, giving a more appropriate balance to the monitoring of learner performance. The information provided to governors to enable them to review and challenge the college about its quality of provision has improved. Governors have better access to key performance data and analysis, with clearer comparisons against targets and national averages, enabling them to monitor the college's progress more effectively.

Governors remain highly committed to and supportive of the college's work. They continue to review and assess their own performance as a governing body. A revised approach this academic year has led to the identification of clear governors' strengths and areas for improvement and the development of a minimum set of standards to help further improve the effectiveness of their role. For example, minimum attendance targets at college functions and at formal governor training events. More regular briefings for governors are being introduced this year such as presentations by curriculum managers and updated training on equalities legislation.

At the last monitoring visit, the college was in the process of reviewing its self-assessment arrangements to further enhance efficiency and effectiveness. What progress has it made in regards to this?	Reasonable progress

The college continues to analyse the feedback from learners, staff and partners to inform the self-assessment process. Data are generally used effectively to make judgements about retention, attendance and success rates.

The college has increased the degree of scrutiny and challenge for each of the curriculum reports through a new system of internal validation. Heads of curriculum areas present their draft report to a panel of senior managers and justify the grades it contains. Once the reports have been internally validated they are subjected to additional, external scrutiny through a peer review

process which includes challenges from representatives of partner colleges. The draft version of the 2007/08 self-assessment report is reasonably thorough and self-critical, although some evaluations appear a little over-generous.