

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Hereford College of Arts

Date of visit: 7 October 2008

### Context

Hereford College of Arts is a small specialist college in the city of Hereford. It is the only specialist college for art, media, design and performing arts in the Midlands. It operates across four sites including the main site at Folly Lane. It offers visual and performing arts courses at further education (FE) and higher education (HE) level. In 2007/08, the college enrolled 547 FE students of whom 449 were aged 16 to 18 and 98 were adults. The overwhelming majority of FE students at the college are white and from Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

At its previous inspection, the college's overall effectiveness was judged as good, with good capacity to improve. All key aspects were graded good, except for achievement and standards, which were graded as satisfactory. Three sector subject areas were inspected, of which two, art and design and diploma in foundation studies were judged as good, and the third area of performing arts was judged as satisfactory.

### Achievement and standards

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| How much progress has been made in strengthening improved retention rates and further improving success rates since the previous inspection? | Significant progress |
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College data available at the time of the visit show a significant improvement in the overall long course success rate for students aged 16 to 18 in 2007/08. The rate compares favourably with the 2006/07 national average. Achievement data for the very small number of adult students on long courses was incomplete at the time of the visit. The overall retention rate improved considerably in 2007/08 and compares favourably with the national average, following a significant dip in 2005/06 and only a small improvement in 2006/07. Pass rates, including those with high grades, remain well above average. Improvements in success rates on individual courses are also significant. The part-time Level 3 diploma in foundation studies, following a re-structure to become a one year course, has a much improved success rate to well above average. Similarly, the success rate on the first diploma in performing arts improved significantly to well above average, with all students staying on until the end of the course. Although the retention rate on the national diploma in music practice improved considerably, improvement in the success rate was negligible

because of a low pass rate. The success rate for this course remains well below average.

### Quality of provision

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| How successful have actions to improve the effectiveness of learning support proved to be? | Reasonable progress |
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The provision of additional learning support continues to have a positive impact on the success rates of learners receiving it. College data for 2007/08 show success rates that are higher than average for these students on Level 2 courses but closer to average on Level 3 courses, although the analysis of these data is incomplete. The take-up of support by those identified as needing it in 2007/08 remained low at 56%. Actions taken by the college at the start of 2008/09 to ensure a higher take-up are bearing fruit. Students are given the results of initial assessments taken before the start of term at enrolment in a face-to-face meeting with a member of the learning support team and encouraged from an early stage to take up additional help. All students sign a learning agreement which requires them to take up support as needed. Much of the perceived stigma attached to receiving learning support has been successfully removed and students spoke positively of its impact and the way in which staff support them. At the start of 2008/09 a much higher percentage is taking up the provision of additional help. The learning support team is well resourced. Members of the team are dedicated to specific courses and integrate well with subject teams. A move to a larger and better situated learning support base with the provision of tutorial rooms nearby is about to take place. Learning support staff report frequently to curriculum managers on individual student progress and provide senior managers with a regular overview of the effectiveness of provision. The much smaller number of students who do not take up support is monitored half-termly and, because of the instigation of the learning agreement, the college is much better placed to require them to take up additional support if they are at risk of underperforming.

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| To what extent has employer engagement been increased and used effectively in developing the quality of provision? | Insufficient progress |
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In response to the need to improve employer engagement, a business and enterprise development officer has recently been appointed and a strategic overview undertaken. Links with schools, with HE and with the other specialist art colleges are strong, and are being used to develop the curriculum further. This includes populating the college's virtual learning environment with specialist course materials and in providing experience of HE for students preparing UCAS applications. Many tutors are themselves active practitioners in their specialist fields, with established links to professional groups and networks. These links are being used to target potential employers but the college is aware that many of those who work in the arts sector are sole traders rather than employers. An employers' open evening is due to take place shortly with approximately 50 employers expected to attend. These are drawn from a very wide range of sectors, including some on the periphery of the

arts. The college plans to use this event to plan a programme of business responsive training as well as to identify practitioners willing to support courses. However, it is too soon to judge the impact of these developments.

#### Leadership and management

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| What actions have been taken to improve the aspects of accommodation identified as poor at the previous inspection? | Reasonable progress |
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The college has made substantial changes to the use of its accommodation by moving all performing arts provision back onto the main site and by reconfiguring the use of art and design teaching accommodation to allow for better integration of specialist areas and maximising the use of available open plan space. Performing arts students have more spacious rooms to work in, easy access to the college's theatre and will shortly have a dance studio on the main site. This move has freed up valuable space at Churchill House for music practice students and has largely mitigated the lower levels of satisfaction with studio facilities evident in the student survey in 2007/08. First diploma art and design students work from an open plan area with video projection facilities allowing more effective whole class activities as well as encouraging sharing of good practice. National diploma students are benefiting from workshops located within the same floor space allowing integration between specialist areas of work and supporting the development of critical analysis skills and sharing of ideas and concepts. These changes are relatively recent; however, students are already noting the improvements to their learning environment as a result. By reviewing and making the timetable more flexible, managers have succeeded in using accommodation and resources more efficiently.

Students' access to a wider range of refreshments and a larger area for eating and socialising has been improved by the completion of the new refectory in the adjacent college of technology. Levels of student satisfaction with library, general accommodation and specialist resources are high. Plans to increase library space to include a seminar room make good use of available space.

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| To what extent have actions been successful in improving some aspects of college-wide monitoring and target setting? | Reasonable progress |
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The college has a well-established system of lesson observations to monitor the quality of teaching and learning, validated by another specialist college as an external partner. More staff have been trained as observers. Outcomes from observations are analysed for common themes within programme areas and this is being used effectively to plan staff development. The college uses data on students' performance effectively to monitor achievement levels and is beginning to use the learner achievement tracker as a measure of students' progress based on prior attainment, but it is in the early stages of this work. However, course managers make good use of prior attainment information and results from assessment at interview to set target grades for students. These are recorded in individual learning

plans, which are used consistently and reviewed at each of the bi-monthly tutorials. Students on the diploma in foundation studies course complete learning journals to record their experiences and reflect on the progress they are making. Tutor input into these journals includes regular reviews of progress and target setting. Although useful as reflective learning records, reviews of progress do not distinguish clearly between formative feedback and specific targets for improvement.