

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Hopwood Hall
Date of visit: 5 December 2008

Context

Hopwood Hall College is currently the tertiary college for the metropolitan borough of Rochdale, although this designation will change as the new sixth form college for Rochdale is established. The college is located on two main sites: the Rochdale site is in the town centre and the Middleton campus is located five miles south of Rochdale.

Rochdale is the second largest borough in Greater Manchester with a population of just over 200,000. It is ranked as one of the most deprived boroughs in England. The proportion of qualified adults and the number of school leavers achieving five A* to C grades at GCSE are below both the local and national averages.

The college provides mainly vocational programmes and offers provision in 15 Learning and Skills Council's sector subject areas. From 2010 the college will no longer provide GCE A level courses as this provision will be offered at the new Rochdale Sixth Form College. In 2006/07 the college had 7,142 learners, of which 3,691 were aged 16 to 18 and 3,451 were adults. Most full-time learners are aged 16 to 18. Just over a third of all full-time learners are studying a level 3 course.

The proportion of learners from a minority ethnic background is 25% which is more than double the proportion found in the local population. There are currently 75 apprentices on work-based learning programmes. The college has a substantial Train to Gain contract.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in improving overall success rates?	Reasonable progress
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In 2006/07 the overall success rate increased by around four percentage points to 74%, which is around the sector average. College data for 2007/08 indicate a further improvement in overall success rates to around 77%.

In 2006/07 the long course success rate increased by five percentage points to 72% which is around the national average for similar colleges. The rate for learners aged 16 to 18 improved in 2006/07 to 75% which is slightly above the national average. College data for 2007/08 indicates that the long course success rate for learners aged 16 to 18 remained broadly the same as the previous year. The long course success rate for adults remained static since the previous inspection and was below the national average in 2006/07. In 2007/08 the rate increased by six percentage points to 72%, just under the 2006/07 average.

In 2007/08 the short course success rate improved to 93% and is higher than the national average for both short and very short courses in 2006/07. College data for 2007/08 indicates a fall in the short course success rate although it remains high and above the 2006/07 national average. The proportion of learners on short courses is small.

What progress has been made in improving pass rates for learners on level 3 courses?	Significant progress
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Overall pass rates at level 3 have improved markedly since the previous inspection. For learners aged 16 to 18, who represent the vast majority of learners at this level, achievement has improved by nearly 6 percentage points in 2006/07 to around the national average. Achievement for adult learners in the same year improved by 8 percentage points and is above the national average. College data for 2007/08 indicates a further improvement in pass rates for all learners.

How much progress has been made in improving framework achievements of apprentices on work based learning?	Reasonable progress
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In 2005/06 and 2006/07 framework completion rates and timely completion rates for apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships were low and below the national averages, which were also low. In 2005/06 only 37% of advanced apprentices and 41% of apprentices successfully completed their frameworks. In 2006/07, there was a small improvement with completion rates of 39% for advanced apprentices and 48% for apprentices. In 2005/06 and 2006/07 NVQ completion rates were also low and, with the exception of advanced apprentices in 2005/06, below the national National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) rates.

In 2007/08 advanced apprenticeship framework completion rates show an improvement on the previous two years although they are still low at 54%. Apprenticeship framework completion rates, however, show a considerable improvement and were satisfactory at 74%. Learner numbers are low; only 19 advanced apprentices and 36 apprentices successfully completing their frameworks.

What progress has been made to improve achievement on Train to Gain since the previous inspection?	Significant progress
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In 2005/06 Train to Gain NVQ achievements were good at 83%, although timely completions were low at 52%. In 2006/07 there was a slight fall in learner numbers. However, achievements increased still further and timely completions were much higher at 88%.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving the quality of teaching and learning? Has the use of information learning technology to enhance lessons improved?	Reasonable progress
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The college has successfully changed the ethos to one where teaching and learning and the improvement of the individual learner experience are at the centre of its work. Actions to improve teaching and learning include the appointment of a teaching and learning coach to each curriculum area. In 2007/08 the staff development programme focused entirely on teaching and learning with a particular emphasis on the use of questioning techniques, lesson planning, differentiation and the use of information learning technology.

The proportion of good or better teaching observed by the college in 2007/08 has increased. The rigour of the lesson observation system has improved although there are some shortcomings in the records of observations. All staff including part-time and agency staff are observed annually. Action plans are produced for all staff. Those whose lessons were graded at 3 or 4 work closely with a teaching and learning coach to resolve issues and are re-observed.

What progress has been made in the setting and reviewing of targets for learners?	Reasonable progress
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The college has a strong focus on raising learners' aspirations for success; there has been an increase in the achievement of higher grades in 2007/08. Learners' performance is reviewed regularly by academic tutors who are supported well by pastoral staff allocated to each curriculum area. All learners, including those on vocational and work-based learning programmes, are set achievement targets for their qualification. Tutors use previous performance and the results of diagnostic testing to set targets at the end of the four week induction period. However, some targets are not always appropriate and are too challenging for some learners. In some cases short term targets are too vague. For example they state test dates for learners but do not state actions to enable learners to improve their performance. Individual learning plans which are the starting point for target-setting are often too generic to be of value to the individual.

There is an increased focus on the progress of work-based learners and reviews to assess their progress. Reviews in the work place are not observed as part of the quality assurance process.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in establishing and implementing a learner involvement strategy?	Reasonable progress
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A learner involvement strategy is in place and staff have been appointed recently to drive this forward. Many of the actions already taken to involve learners are based on the current strengths of course reviews and the work of the student council. A few learners are increasingly involved in the college's self-assessment process. Many more learners have been involved in the proposals for the new college premises. There is some encouraging work to involve more hard to reach learners. It is too early to comment upon the impact of these actions.

What progress has been made to improve the management and administration of work based learning?	Reasonable progress
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A satisfactory range of initiatives has been implemented to strengthen the management and administration of work-based learning. Learners' eligibility for apprenticeship programmes is now more rigorous and completed before enrolment. Where learners are ineligible for apprenticeships they are guided to alternative provision. Skills assessments are used effectively to identify prior learning, competencies and additional learning needs. The induction process has been thoroughly reviewed and made more relevant to work-based learners. Apprentices' progress is more effectively monitored and slow progress is identified at an earlier stage to increase timely completion rates.

Liaison with employers has improved and they are better informed about framework requirements and learners' learning needs. The delivery of key skills has been reviewed and 'front loaded' with greater emphasis on examination requirements especially for application of number. External test dates in electrical installation and early years and child care have been brought forward to give learners a greater chance of successfully completing their frameworks within the predicted time scales. Electrical installation resources now include a mock test centre and up-dated testing bays. Progression opportunities for work-based learners have been reviewed and satisfactorily increased.

The service level agreement for sub-contracted Train to Gain provision is inadequate. Too little emphasis is placed on the importance of ensuring that sub-contractors deliver high quality provision, with thorough initial assessment, regular progress reviews and integrated skills for life support.

What progress has been made to achieve greater rigour in quality assurance arrangements and in strengthening the college's capacity to improve?	Reasonable progress
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Quality assurance processes have been strengthened. A key element of the quality assurance process includes a biennial enhanced review of all curriculum areas. Outcomes of lesson observations are used in these curriculum reviews, in individual performance reviews and college self-assessment. Joint lesson observations are an important part of the quality system. Managers observe with external observers partly for professional development but, in the main, to assure the robustness of their lesson observation judgements. Internal observers are trained and outcomes are moderated. However, lesson observation records are sometimes too descriptive and grades do not always match what is recorded about the lesson. A teaching and learning staff development plan has been identified for 2008/09.

The draft 2007/08 SAR overcomes many of the issues of the previous report. Most judgements appear to be realistic. However, there is still a tendency to overstate what the college does well. Too many of the college's key strengths relate to improvements rather than actual strengths. A few of the college's weaknesses have not been identified specifically as areas for improvement. Work-based learning has too low a profile in the draft self-assessment report, especially in view of the proposed strategic direction to become a vocational college from 2010. The use of data to inform self-assessment has improved although the college recognises that more work needs to be done to ensure the accuracy of data.

What progress has been made in increasing employer engagement, with a particular focus on Train to Gain?	Reasonable progress
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The college has a strong focus on employer engagement and meeting the needs of employers in the region. There is a clear strategy for improving employer engagement including the recent appointment of an executive director for skills. New premises have been sourced close to the business community as a base for employer engagement. A customer relations management system has been purchased to better manage employer relations.

Higher targets for the recruitment of employees and apprentices have been negotiated with the Learning and Skills Council. Numbers of Train to Gain learners have increased and delivery partners have been appointed. Care has been taken to select appropriate partners. However, the service level agreements lack detail. There is a lack of clarity about responsibilities, for example, for quality assurance. The system for audit and compliance is thorough, but as yet there is insufficient quality assurance in the workplace. Nevertheless, there is now a good foundation for future success of employer engagement, but it is too early to judge impact of current developments.

What progress has been made to improve accommodation and resources?	Significant progress
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There has been significant investment to improve current accommodation and resources, particularly information learning technology. An appropriate balance has been struck between the need to update current classroom facilities and planning resources for the new college building. Some thoughtful piloting of innovative technologies is taking place prior to making decisions about what to install in the future.