

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Aylesbury College

Date of visit: 1 April 2009

Context

Aylesbury College is a medium-sized general further education (GFE) college in Aylesbury centre. The college has recently benefited from completely rebuilt accommodation. It offers programmes in all sector subject areas. In 2008/09, the college enrolled approximately 1750 students aged 16-18 and 2190 aged 19 or over, including 437 work-based learners. In addition, there are 248 students who are under 16 years old. Competition for students in this area is intense, with five other colleges nearby, and all the local maintained schools have sixth forms. Although most of Buckinghamshire is affluent, three areas in Aylesbury have considerable deprivation. The college's mission is to 'deliver good quality skills at all levels to sustain a competitive economy and serve the community'.

Achievement and standards

How successful has the college been in improving success rates of students?	Insufficient progress
---	-----------------------

College data for 2007/08 show that the overall success rate improved slightly, due mainly to an improvement in student retention, but the success rate is still below average. The college has made good progress in improving success rates for adult students on long courses at level 1; they are now above the national average however, rates for students aged 16-18 have declined to below average. Improvements at level 2 have been slow, particularly for the majority younger age group. Success rates for students aged 16-18 at level 3 have improved since the previous inspection but are still well below average, particularly for AS-level courses. Rates for short courses remain close to the average, although those for 16-18 year old students have declined to significantly below average.

Student retention has improved slowly since the previous inspection, but for most levels and age groups is still slightly below average. Retention at level 1 improved significantly for adults, although it declined for the larger 16-18 age group. Achievement overall and for long courses remains around average after a small improvement by adults, but a decline by 16-18 year old students. Achievement rates for younger students on level 3 courses have not improved since the last monitoring visit and are below national averages.

How much progress has been made in improving success rates for apprentices?	Insufficient progress
---	-----------------------

Since the last monitoring visit the overall framework success rate for apprentices at level 2 increased by 10 percentage points to the national average. The timely success rate also improved, but remains below average. The overall success rate for advanced apprentices did not change and the timely success rate improved very little. Both were below average in 2006/07, and are now well below the increasing national average; the overall rate is significantly below. There are low success rates for advanced apprentices on most work-based learning programmes offered by the college. However, rates for apprentices at level 2 vary across the areas of learning; those for customer services and business are lower than average, whereas those for health and social care, and construction are above. Success rates for females are well below those for males. The monitoring of apprentices' progress has improved and the college has strategies in place to improve success however, it is too early to see their full impact on overall and timely success rates.

How much progress has been made in improving success rates in key skills in the current year?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

At the last monitoring visit success rates for key skills had improved considerably for students aged 16-18, and were high for all ages however, in 2007/08, achievement for both age groups declined to well below average. Following analysis of the causes for this drop the college has changed the management and co-ordination of key skills provision. More thorough processes for monitoring students' performance have been implemented. Progress with portfolio completion is monitored more thoroughly, and there is a more effective system for moderating and submitting portfolios for full achievement of the key skill qualification. College data show that in the current year success rates are at 52%, and the college is confident that overall success rates will again be high by the end of the year.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made to improve target-setting and the monitoring of students' progress?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

The college initially sets target grades for students based on prior attainment and now sets 'stretch' targets to raise expectations and aspirations. Tutors monitor students' progress and regularly record their attainment on assignments. Progress reviews are conducted termly. There are also additional workshops and catch-up sessions during review weeks to help those students identified as needing additional support, or who are at risk of underachieving. Progress is recorded on individual

learning plans (ILPs), though actions and targets for improvement on the sample of ILPs seen during the visit are not always sufficiently precise or measurable to help students improve.

While course tutors are able to monitor whether individual students are on target to meet their target grades, the outcomes of this process are not systematically analysed at course or curriculum level, or reflected in mid-year course reviews. The college does not yet monitor the extent of students' progress at overall college level, and acknowledges the need to develop systems to support this.

The college has placed much greater emphasis on identifying students at risk of not completing their courses. It has appointed 'at risk' tutors who follow up reasons for absence and provide additional support for these students. Early indications are that this is having a positive impact on retention rates, which are currently higher than at a similar time last year.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made in improving self-assessment and quality improvement plans across all curriculum areas?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

The college has implemented a standard format for curriculum area self-assessment reports (SARs) to ensure that all managers take account of key performance indicators and evidence. This has led to greater consistency in approach however, in 2007/08 the reports tended to be overly descriptive and focused on actions and process rather than outcomes and judgements. The college acknowledges this, and is aware of the need to make the reports more evaluative.

Curriculum SARs now make better use of the findings from lesson observations to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning, and identifying key strengths and areas for improvement. Quality improvement plans are well aligned to the key areas for development, although there is often a lack of quantitative data to set precise targets for improvement. Actions to be taken are recorded, but it is not clear how progress or success will be measured.

In 2008/09 the college has introduced a more formalised and rigorous approach to monitoring performance at curriculum area level. In the termly moderation reports, there is clear evidence that key performance indicators are reviewed and discussed, but actions tend to focus on processes rather than expected outcomes.

What is the impact of the advanced practitioners on improving teaching and learning, and curriculum self-assessment?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

The advanced practitioners play a key role in improving teaching and learning through conducting developmental observations, identifying and sharing good practice, and offering training and support where areas for improvement are identified. All staff now receive a developmental lesson observation before their graded observation. This has helped teachers to feel more confident about trying out different approaches in their teaching, or focusing on a particular area requiring further improvement.

The college's lesson observation profile indicates progress in improving the quality of teaching. The main outcome has been in improving some satisfactory teaching to good, but there has been less impact on increasing the proportion of outstanding teaching. The grades across different curriculum areas in 2007/08 shows considerable variations in the quality of lessons in different areas, with low proportions of good or better teaching seen in business and ICT, construction and hair, beauty and sport. Internal quality review in 2008/09, including lesson observations by external partners, indicates improvements in teaching in business and ICT.