

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Berkshire College of Agriculture

Date of visit: 8 July 2009

### Context

Berkshire College of Agriculture, near Maidenhead, is a specialist land-based further education (FE) college serving the rural and urban areas of Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and West London. While maintaining a core of land-based work in horticulture, countryside, floristry, animal care and equine studies, the college also has activity in sports studies, early years and care, public services, construction and motor vehicle engineering.

In 2007/08, the college enrolled about 2800 students. 728 were full-time equivalent students aged 16 to 18 and 223 were full-time equivalent adult students. Just under a half of these are on level 2 courses. Through its Pathways Foundation Learning it provides entry level and progression to level 2 and level 3 programmes. In addition, it provided vocational courses for 225 young people aged 14 to 16 from local schools. It recruits approximately 150 higher education (HE) students, and works in partnership with local authorities and community groups to provide a general education programme and community activities.

Berkshire College of Agriculture was last inspected in November 2006 when all aspects were found to be satisfactory, apart from the leadership and management of work-based learning which were inadequate. The college no longer offers work-based learning. Three of the four curriculum areas inspected were found to be good, but provision in sport studies was judged inadequate. The area of sport was judged to be satisfactory at a reinspection.

### Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made to improve and maintain achievement and standards?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress to improve overall achievement and standards. The college data show that overall success rates rose in 2007/08 to just above the national average, though success rates for students aged 16 to 18 on level 2 courses are still below the national average.

Overall retention has improved though it is still low on level 1 and level 2 courses for students aged 16 to 18, mainly due to poor retention in construction and sports studies which the college has identified in its self-assessment. Achievement for adults on level 3 courses is still an area for improvement as it is below the national average.

The college data show that while there are no overall significant variations in the performance of different groups of students, success rates for 19 students aged 16 to 18 of Black African and mixed heritage were slightly lower than the majority white students.

Attendance has improved and the college's in-year data indicate 91% attendance on full-time courses. The systems for monitoring and follow up of absences are good.

The college is aware of the variations in performance and has developed appropriate strategies to improve achievement and standards. Staff reported that their access to data has improved.

How much progress has the college made to improve key skills and prepare for functional skills?	Insufficient progress
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The college has made insufficient progress to improve key skills. Success rates on key skills qualifications over the last three years show no pattern of improvement. They have often been low and in a few cases have declined. The college acknowledges that there have been significant inconsistencies across the college with regard to this area of work. Students have not always been allocated to the correct level of study to ensure that they have been suitably challenged, nor have they always been studying the most appropriate key skill to help them with their qualifications.

This has now been identified as an area for improvement by the college and there is a strong focus on improving both the quality of this work and the standards attained by students over the next year. Suitable action plans are now in place to address these issues. Lesson observations, including the college's 'walkabout' system of observation, have helped to identify where teachers are missing opportunities to recognise key skills in students' work. Training to help teachers improve their skills in this respect, to build their own confidence in teaching key skills and to support portfolio building is now under way.

There are already signs of improvement, for example, students studying on equine, horticulture, health and care programmes are taking two key skills this year instead of one as they had done in the past year. The college has well founded plans to pilot functional skills in September 2009 and has been working closely with partner schools to ensure that they provide effective functional skills experience for students.

#### Quality of provision

What actions has the college taken to improve teaching and learning since the last monitoring visit and what impact can it demonstrate?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in improving teaching and learning. There is now a good range of systems in place to support teachers and help them to become more effective in their work. The college's self-assessment of the quality of

teaching and learning shows significant improvements. The percentage of good or better lessons has risen from 57% in 2007/08 to 72% in 2008/09. There has been a reduction in inadequate teaching and learning from 8% of all observed lessons in 2007/08 to 3% in 2008/09. The college had set itself-ambitious targets to improve teaching and learning and has come very close to meeting these targets.

The processes used to assess the quality of teaching and learning are robust and reliable. The college lesson observation report form has suitable detail which provides both a realistic report on the quality of the work seen and a good guide to help the teacher to further develop their effectiveness. Teachers who have been awarded a grade 3 or 4 for their observed lesson have an improvement plan and are re-observed within 12 weeks. Last year this resulted in around 40% of them improving their grade at their second observation.

New senior lecturers have been appointed to act as mentors. They have been trained in the Subject Learning Coaches programme and provide detailed and subject-specific support to help their colleagues to improve their teaching. There have also been appropriate college-wide training events that addressed specific aspects of improving teaching and learning: for example, training in the use of the college's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), behaviour management and improving lesson planning.

Teachers are very supportive of these improvements. They see that the college is striving to help them to work more effectively and provide their students with a better experience in their lessons. They regard the outcomes of lesson observations as fair and value the support they receive from their senior colleagues.

Since the last monitoring visit, the college has increased the proportion of teaching staff with recognised teaching qualifications to 68%.

How much has feedback and assessment improved since identified as an area for improvement?	Reasonable progress
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Feedback from external verifier reports on assessment is positive. The college has improved the internal verification system so that work is assessed and moderated earlier. The self-assessment report of the college has identified where further improvements can be made. Feedback provided on student work sampled was helpful, supportive and detailed, explaining clearly how to improve.

Good account has been taken of student feedback in relation to improving assessment. For example, the scheduling and timing of assignments was reviewed and reorganised in line with comments made and the suggestions of the students regarding return of work within agreed timescales are being acted on.

## Leadership and management

How much progress has the college made in improving the use and availability of information learning technology (ILT)?	Reasonable progress
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There has been a significant investment in ILT, both in the provision of a well planned, student-centred, modern learning resource centre, and equipment such as interactive whiteboards and mobile technology for use in practical areas of the curriculum. This has been supported by some effective training for staff who comment that they now feel more comfortable about using ILT in planning and delivering learning and teaching.

The college has recently appointed some dedicated staff to manage and lead on ILT and it has produced an effective draft ILT strategy and action plan to further develop the use of ILT in teaching across the college.

The impact of the use of ILT across the college varies and is still being developed, for example in producing electronic individual learning plans for students and independent learning packages.

Is equality and diversity being promoted more effectively since the last monitoring visit? If so, how is this being demonstrated and what is the impact?	Reasonable progress
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Planning for promoting equality and diversity is thorough and this is built appropriately into schemes of work. It is also an aspect for consideration in the college system for observing teaching and learning. This has raised awareness among staff of its importance. However, active promotion across the college in all areas is not consistent.

Themed days and enrichment events to promote the different aspects of equality and diversity are regular features. The college has some good progression routes, supported by the college Pathways programme and Action for Inclusion which are good examples of the college's commitment to equality and diversity. The college self-assessment report for 07/08 does not identify an overall grade for equality and diversity.

The college's commitment to sustainable development is evident in its building programme: the construction of a bio-mass boiler and use of eco-intelligent technologies in other buildings are good examples of this commitment.