

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: North West Kent

Date of visit: 29 January 2009

Context

North West Kent College is a large further education college situated on two main sites, in Dartford and Gravesend. The college has experienced significant growth in recent years and is based in an area of considerable economic development. Within the local catchment area there are six grammar schools and 11 non-selective schools. All but one of these schools has a sixth form.

The college offers a broad curriculum from foundation to degree level. It has developed strong links with local schools to offer programmes for 14-16 year old learners. The college is organised into sixteen schools, covering all sector subject areas, except land-based industries. The college is a national centre for specialist short course provision in refrigeration, air conditioning and courses for the mercantile industry. The college is in the process of a significant rebuilding programme.

At the previous inspection in 2006, the overall effectiveness of the college was judged to be satisfactory. Of the 6 subject sectors inspected, 3 were graded as good, 2 satisfactory and literacy, numeracy and ESOL was judged to be inadequate. In March, 2008 literacy, numeracy and ESOL was re-inspected and judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made to improve success rates for adults, particularly level 2?	Significant progress
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Since the previous inspection, the college has made significant progress in improving overall success rates for adults. Over the two years, success rates at Levels 1, 2 and 3 have increased by 10, 13 and 4 percentage points respectively. All three levels are well above the 2006/7 national averages. Subject sectors with consistently low success rates made significant improvements in 2007/08, such as in travel, engineering and in particular, construction.

Apprenticeship provision for learners aged over 19 years has improved well. In 2007/08, overall success rates are 75%. Train to Gain provision presents a mixed picture. In 2007/08, all skills for life learners achieved the intended qualification outcome. However, Level 2 learner success rates are very low, at 57%. The college

is able to attribute some of the poor performance to two partner organisations that it no longer works with. The college has recently recruited a monitoring review officer to focus on quality improvement. At the time of the monitoring visit, Train to Gain success rates had improved to 76%. However, the college has set an insufficiently challenging target for Train to Gain success rates in 2008/09. The latest self-assessment report appropriately recognises the improvements in adult provision.

How much progress has the college made in improving key skills performance since the previous inspection?	Significant progress
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Since the 2006, inspection, the college has fundamentally changed the way key skills are managed and delivered. Current arrangements are appropriate. A Key Skill Action Group was set up and chaired by a senior manager. Each school is now responsible for the delivery, setting and monitoring of key skills. Key skill co-ordinators support teachers to integrate key skills into the curriculum. All teaching staff attended key skills training as part of an awareness raising programme. Most schools exceeded the target set in 2007/08 and overall the college achieved a success rate of 66%. The current minimum college target is 65% and regardless of the previous year's results all schools have the same target. At present, college policy precludes learners achieving more than one key skill in a year and only one school offers opportunities to complete a key skill at a higher level.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made to improve the quality assurance of learning support?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in monitoring the quality of learning support. All aspects of learning support activities are monitored through regular monthly audits. The established practice to observe all 75 learning support assistants (LSAs) is a real strength. Observers report that they have a good knowledge of the areas of practice that need further development. For example, the standard of note-taking that LSAs undertake to support learners was identified as an area for improvement. Training was provided for all learning support staff and note-taking has been a focus of the regular audit checks. However, there is no overall formal analysis to inform management or to plan professional development.

Strengths and areas for improvement are insufficiently detailed in the departmental self-assessment report and related action plan. There is insufficient evidence to support key strengths and actions for improvement are too general. For example, the self-assessment report acknowledges the need for further targeted CPD activities, but it does not provide specific details of what activities are needed to make improvement.

How much progress has been made towards improving the quality of the observation of teaching and learning feedback to teachers, to help improve teaching?	Reasonable progress
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Reasonable progress has been made. Arrangements to support teachers and to develop and improve their teaching are extensive. These include informal peer and buddy support as well as more formal arrangements for professional mentoring and support from an advanced practitioner. Teachers value the verbal feedback they receive, on areas for improvement but also on examples of good practice that they can share with colleagues. Formal observations of teaching and learning are well established and carried out annually for all teachers and learning support staff. Arrangements for giving verbal and written feedback are timed appropriately. However, the content of written observation reports varies in quality. In some reports there is an over-emphasis on teaching and some confusion about the difference between teaching and learning. Some grades awarded are not substantiated by the written judgements.

Leadership and management

How much progress has the college made towards the development of partnerships for 14-16 provision?	Significant progress
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The college's 14-16 provision was judged to be good at the previous inspection. The college has continued to develop this area and has made significant progress in developing its links with partners. A college senior manager chairs the local planning forum relating to the introduction of new diplomas. The college has recently appointed an operations manager to oversee the further development of school partnerships. Links with nine local schools are well established and provide learners aged 14-16 with easy access to college courses. In response to the challenging behaviour presented by some of the 14-16 intake of learners, in 2007/08 the college introduced enhanced support. This has proved to be particularly successful in getting excluded pupils back into education, employment or training. From a total of 21 who started, 17 completed the programme and all either went into further education or employment.

The college works very effectively with local schools to develop vocational centres in schools. For example, the college provides specialist teachers to schools and has been proactive in helping to design and set up one school vocational centre.

How much progress has been made to the use of data to improve course performance?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection it was reported that management information, while timely and accurate, was not used by all as an essential instrument with which to

improve performance. In the latest self-assessment report, a key area for the college to improve is consistency in the application of quality assurance, including the use of data to improve course performance.

The college has recently improved its data reporting systems. Data is now readily accessible and appropriately monitored. From September 2008, a standardised programme quality file has been introduced. Key performance indicators are now a formal part of section and course team meetings. Programme 'health checks' support the monitoring process for all courses on a regular basis. Underperforming courses are closely monitored for improvement. The reporting of attendance has recently improved through the introduction of electronic registers. However, target-setting to improve course performance is not fully developed.