

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: West Kent College

Date of visit: 25 June 2009

Context

West Kent College is a large general further education college, mainly located in the town of Tonbridge. It is currently undergoing a major re-building programme. The last full inspection was in March 2006. At that inspection, the college's overall effectiveness was judged to be good, as were its leadership and management, capacity to improve, and students' achievements. The quality of provision was judged to be satisfactory. Of the six subject sector areas inspected, three were judged to be good and three satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made in improving students' outcomes, in particular those for students aged 16 to 18 on level three courses?	Insufficient progress
---	-----------------------

The college has made insufficient progress in improving success rates, particularly for students on level 3 courses. According to data for 2007/08 presented in the college's self-assessment report (SAR), overall success rates on long courses remained static between 2006/07 and 2007/08 at 72%. For students on long courses at level 1, improvement was good: success rates rose considerably, particularly for students aged 16 to 18. At level 2, success rates declined slightly for both age groups, in the context of a rising national average. For students aged 16 to 18 on level 3 courses, success rates remained unchanged from 2006/07 at 68%. For adult learners at level 3, success rates fell by 8 percentage points to 70%. Overall, success rates in 2007/08 are above the national average for 2006/07 and are likely to be in line with the national averages for 2007/08, with the exception of success rates for students aged 16 to 18 at level 3, which remain significantly below national rates for similar colleges. Updated data presented by the college during the visit show a slight improvement on the data presented in the SAR, but it remains the case that this improvement is not consistent at all levels. The college is confident that the rise in retention rates seen in 2008/09 will lead to a rise in success rates for the current year.

The college provides employer responsive provision both through Train to Gain and the apprenticeship route. Summary data presented during the visit show that although success rates on this provision are improving, the proportion of learners who gain the full qualification within the time expected remains low.

The SAR judges achievement and standards to be good. However, the commentary accompanying this judgement is insufficiently evaluative to demonstrate that this judgement is sound. For example, some of the evidence used to illustrate the strengths of students' achievements is based on the extent of provision or the effectiveness of aspects of quality assurance, rather than on a detailed analysis of success rates in comparison to national averages and of the progress that students make.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made in improving the quality of provision in science and mathematics, and in humanities?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

The college SAR for 2007/08 judged provision both in science and mathematics and in humanities to be inadequate. Reasonable progress has been made in improving provision in both areas. The bulk of provision in these areas is GCSE A/AS levels. The college recognises that it needs to improve this provision in order to raise success rates at level 3. It is tackling this through a combination of approaches. These include raising entry requirements, cutting out some courses where provision has been unsatisfactory, re-packaging the provision into discrete pathways, and improving initial advice and guidance to encourage more students to enrol for vocational courses where their GCSE grades do not predict good performance at A/AS level. These approaches are sensible in the main, and are likely to lead to an improvement in success rates. Despite this, they are not sufficiently well-informed by detailed data analysis, for example, of the progress made by different groups of students in comparison with their attainment at GCSE. As a consequence, managers have not based all their decisions on sufficiently comprehensive evidence.

Steps are also being taken to make sounder judgements about the quality of teaching and learning in both areas. In 2007/08, nearly half of all lessons were judged to be outstanding. Managers recognise that this does not sit comfortably with either students' results or their views, and that not all teaching meets the needs of students. College leaders predict that recent staffing changes will have a beneficial impact on the quality of provision in both areas.

How much progress has been made in improving the quality and effectiveness of individual learning plans?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

At the last monitoring visit in 2008, the college was reported to have made insufficient progress in developing and monitoring individual learning plan (ILP) targets. The college has appointed a new manager with specific responsibility for the tutorial programme, and has made reasonable progress in improving the quality of ILPs. Significant structural changes have been made to the tutorial arrangements, and these enable academic tutors to focus more on the setting and monitoring of targets for individual students. The college has appointed a team of five pastoral tutors who focus on the welfare aspects of the tutorial programme in some areas of the curriculum. The college plans to extend this arrangement and will have twelve

pastoral tutors in the next academic year, enabling academic tutors to concentrate on reviewing students' progress. Early signs are that this is working well. Tutors have received training in target setting, and students are beginning to be involved in the process in a few areas. The tutorial team has piloted electronic versions of the ILP, and has arrived at a version that they will be implementing in the next academic year. The current arrangements for ILPs show improvement in their quality and usefulness to students in some areas, but managers recognise that this needs to be further developed across the college.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made in ensuring that the college's lesson observation scheme produces accurate judgments and leads to improvements in teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

The college is making reasonable progress in ensuring that its internal lesson observation scheme produces accurate judgements and leads to an improvement in teaching and learning. College leaders recognise that the lesson observation scheme as it is currently constituted has weaknesses, and are taking steps to improve it.

Currently, teachers are given notice of the precise lesson to be observed, and the grade for the lesson is shared with the observer. Evidence from lessons observed shows that this approach may be giving a distorted view of the quality of lessons. For example, both science and mathematics, and humanities, were judged by the college to be inadequate, yet in 2007/08 nearly half of all lessons observed were judged to be outstanding. A 'mock' inspection carried out this year in the college produced a more realistic view of the quality of teaching, and the approach used in that inspection is to be introduced throughout the college from 2009/10. Teachers will receive two weeks' notice of a week during which any of their lessons will be observed, and the observer will not share the grade awarded with the teacher. Observations will be carried out by a combination of college observers, external consultants, and observers from other colleges, and more attention will be paid to students' views and the quality of their work. This approach is likely to lead to a more realistic view of the teaching experienced by students.

In addition to the graded observations, line managers and others will carry out additional observations designed to be developmental. Managers are aware that they need to be more assiduous in ensuring that areas for development identified for individual teachers are followed up.

How much progress has been made in promoting equality and diversity through the curriculum?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

At its last inspection the embedding of equality and diversity into the curriculum was judged to be an area for improvement. Over the past year, and particularly since the appointment of a manager to take responsibility for this aspect of the college's work, the college has made reasonable progress. In order to establish a baseline, the

manager, working with the equality and diversity group, carried out an audit of the extent to which equality and diversity themes are included in schemes of work. A useful guidance document for teaching staff on inclusive practice in teaching and learning has been distributed, and senior staff and course team leaders have received training on equality and diversity and the curriculum. The guidance for tutors includes two topics on aspects of equality and diversity, of which tutors are required to implement one. The college recognises that it has further to go in order to achieve consistency of understanding and implementation across all subject areas. Further training for teaching staff is planned in preparation for the next academic year.