

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Exeter College  
Date of visit: 24-25 March 2009

### Context

Exeter College is a tertiary college serving the city and surrounding areas. The college has two major campuses in the city centre and two specialist training centres on its outskirts. In partnership with the Meteorological Office, the college has launched the Reaching Excellence in Achievement Academy (REACH) to help able academic students compete successfully for places at the elite universities.

The City of Exeter has a population of about 122,000 and is growing rapidly with significant new investment from major employers. Unemployment levels are low, at 2.6% in Feb 2009. The staying on rate for young people at age 16 has improved steadily and was 73% in 2007/08.

The college provides opportunities from entry level to level 4 in all sector subject areas other than the land-based industries. The vast majority of students are aged 16-18 and follow level 3 programmes. In recent years, the college has expanded its provision for 16-18 year olds at entry level and levels 1 and 2. The number of adults enrolling at the college has declined significantly during the past three years.

In September 2008 almost 4,100 full-time students were enrolled and the college aims to enrol around 7,000 part-time students by the end of the academic year. The college is a major provider of work-based learning and Train to Gain provision with around 1,800 learners following programmes during 2007/08. Vocational courses are also provided for more than 550 young people aged 14-16, mainly drawn from the city's secondary schools. At the time of the monitoring visit some 560 students were enrolled on higher education, mainly foundation degree programmes.

The college was inspected in March 2008. Achievements and standards, quality of provision and overall effectiveness were judged good with good capacity to improve.

### Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made since the last inspection in improving success rates for students following long courses?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates for 16-18 year olds improved at levels 1 and 2 in 2007/08 and are at the previous year's national average for general further education colleges.

Improvements were more significant for adults at these levels although success rates were still well below the average for colleges of a similar type. Community based information technology provision, which significantly depressed level 2 success rates for adults has been restructured as has ESOL provision which impacted adversely on level 1 outcomes.

On a full-time equivalent basis, over half the students who attended the college in 2007/08 were aged 16-18 and followed programmes at level 3. Success rates improved slightly and were above the 2006/07 national average for general further education colleges. The majority of these students enrolled on GCE A or AS level courses. Success rates for this group of students improved and compared favourably with national rates for general further education colleges. As the college is a major provider of AS and A level courses it is reasonable however to compare its performance in this area with that of sixth form colleges. Whilst A level success rates in 2007/08 were in line with those of sixth form colleges, rates for AS courses were below. Success rates for young people following vocational provision at level 3 declined in the same year. Overall success rates for adults following advanced courses improved and were in line with rates for general further education colleges.

Actions to improve retention rates at different levels have been successful and overall rates at the time of the monitoring visit compared favourably with those for the previous year. Retention rates for specific courses, where performance was below the minimum level of performance set by the Learning and Skills Council in 2005/06, have similarly improved significantly. For those AS and A level subjects where students were entered for module examinations in January 2009, pass rates were significantly higher than in January of the previous year.

What impact have the actions to improve key skills outcomes had on success rates?	Significant progress
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Following the last inspection, the college has made significant improvements in the way in key skills are managed and integrated into the main curriculum provision. Students also have the option of alternative courses to meet their needs and better support to help them make the best choice. Two full-time co-ordinators are responsible for supporting the key skills provision. Staff training on portfolio building has been effective in ensuring subject teachers are appropriately involved in developing students' key skills. Faculty champions support teachers well in improving key skills delivery. Faculty heads now report on key skills to the senior management team regularly and senior managers monitor key skills attendance weekly. Success rates in key skills have risen from 21% in 2005/06 to 39% in 2007/08. At the time of the monitoring visit, success rates were 20% compared to 1% at the same time the previous year. Early achievement rates have improved for AS assignments from 6% in March 2008 to 30% in March 2009, further evidencing significant improvement. The college is involved in a functional skills pilot project for the foundation learning tier and all students participating have been retained and are on target to succeed. Plans to improve and develop this initiative are well advanced.

How much progress has been made to improve work-based learning and train to gain outcomes?	Reasonable progress
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A comprehensive review of work-based learning by consultants appointed by the college was completed in September 2008 and resulted in staff restructuring and clarification of roles. Recruitment, teaching and assessment responsibilities are clear and the provision is now more responsive to employer requirements. Since the last inspection, staff have contributed well to developing an overall strategy for work-based learning and are committed to its implementation. Plans are in place to support learners who lose their jobs whilst training and to extend the provision to people who are not in education, employment or training. Success rates for work-based learning have improved steadily over the last three years. Overall success rates for both apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships are satisfactory and timely success rates are good. Within the profile there is a variation between the performance of individual frameworks with some low rates.

Train to gain success rates are high and learner numbers have increased significantly over the last three years. The college now employs an advanced practitioner to review the provision and ensure that any course which falls within 5% of minimum levels of performance triggers an action plan. Plans are well developed to promote progression from level 2 to level 3 and are well supported by employers.

#### Quality of provision

What actions have been taken to improve the rigour and impact of lesson observations?	Significant progress
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Revised lesson observation procedures were implemented at the beginning of the 2008/09 academic year. Observations are now unannounced and assessments of the quality of teaching and learning are more realistic than hitherto. A process of peer observation helps disseminate good practice. Almost all full and part-time teachers had been observed at the time of the monitoring visit. Students' views are collected and analysed at the end of each observation and contribute well to identifying areas for improvement. A standardised approach has been adopted to record observation judgements and joint observations are conducted to ensure observers are working to the same standards. Observers are consistent in their approach to recording judgements but observation forms do not record sufficient detail about students learning to enable judgements about the effectiveness of teaching and learning to be verified through paper based moderation. Good use is made of lesson observations to identify development needs and good mentoring and coaching support is provided where required. This support is effective in promoting improvement. Increasingly, the college is triangulating judgements about the quality of teaching and learning and students' success rates and increasing the attention paid to the impact of teaching on outcomes.

How has target-setting at student and departmental levels been improved?	Reasonable progress
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Since the last inspection the college has taken appropriate steps to improve the quality of students' individual learning plans and has established a comprehensive review system. Minimum acceptable grades are set for individual students during the first two weeks of the college year. These are reviewed regularly against assessment grades in set work. Electronic individual learning plans are being implemented but are not yet fully in use across the college. The quality of the targets set for students is satisfactory overall but with considerable variation. Some targets are clearly stated and are SMART with well defined review dates. Others are still vague and insufficiently specific to meet the needs of individual learners. It is too early to assess the impact of these developments on students' outcomes.

Departmental target setting has improved and staff have a greater awareness of performance against a range of measures and national performance trends. This has been facilitated well by a much improved management information system and data are easily accessible to teachers and managers. Progress towards achieving targets is monitored carefully across faculties each week and contributes well to identifying underperformance.

#### Leadership and management

How much progress has been made in implementing actions to improve provision operating below the learning and skills council's minimum level of performance?	Significant progress
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The previous inspection judged the overall effectiveness of the college to be good, however some areas of provision were subsequently identified as falling below the minimum level of performance. Since the last inspection the board of governors have appointed a new chair and vice-chair and the board have been actively involved in driving up standards and monitoring improvements. The college has also made key changes at senior management and departmental level. The senior leadership team has carried out a detailed review of every course that failed to meet the minimum level of performance and has put into place a clear improvement strategy and detailed action plan. Teachers and managers are enthusiastic and committed to improvement. The leadership team review the impact of actions carefully every two months and monitor progress against set targets. A number of key actions have been effective in promoting improvement. These included a review of course entry requirements, close monitoring of students to ensure appropriate placement on courses, provision of support to promote learning by students, and focused attention to improve teaching and learning. Robust action was also taken to discontinue or replace courses. The full impact of these measures are still to be fully realised but 2007/08 data demonstrate the measures to have already been very effective in reducing the number of long courses and particularly short courses which are below the minimum level of performance.

What actions have been taken to improve the impact of quality assurance procedures particularly in areas of under performance?	Reasonable progress
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Quality assurance arrangements were judged good at the last inspection and course, faculty and college level self-assessment are effective in identifying areas for improvement. At the time of the monitoring visit the college was embarking on further development of these arrangements. Since the last inspection the college's approach to quality improvement has placed more emphasis on early intervention in areas of emerging concern by senior managers. Reviews of quality and resources conducted each term are now more focused on raising standards. Faculty reviews address progress in areas for improvement identified through self-assessment. The access teachers and managers have to data is much improved and supports early intervention well. Weekly monitoring of attendance and retention by senior managers is effective in identifying courses or students who may be at risk of failing to achieve expected outcomes. Where appropriate, intensive support arrangements are implemented to assist managers and teachers in their endeavours to improve provision.

What action has been taken to consolidate the use of value added measures in promoting students achievements since the last inspection.	Reasonable Progress
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Target minimum grades are set for level 3 students based on value added data and increasing use is made of the learner achievement tracker to support self-assessment at both course and college levels. Sufficient historic data are not currently available to determine value added trends for the college. Overall however, AS level students in 2007/08 made significantly better progress than similar students nationally as did those following BTEC national awards and applied GCE single awards. A-level, national certificate and national diploma students make the overall progress predicted by their qualifications on entry to the college. Contextual value added data, newly published by the DCSF, indicate that level 3 students attending the college make good progress overall by age 19 compared with national figures.