

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Dunstable College
Date of visit: 27 January 2009

Context

Dunstable College is a medium sized general further education college. It is one of three colleges serving Bedfordshire, and the only college which will be in the new unitary authority of Central Bedfordshire from April 2009. It is located in the heart of the town and, in addition, operates primarily from three small sites in Leighton Buzzard, Houghton Regis and Luton.

The college enrolls around 2,500 full-time equivalent learners each year, comprising 1,400 full-time learners and 4,000 on part-time programmes. In 2007/08, some 70% were adult learners and 58% were female. Around 20% of learners were from ethnic backgrounds other than White British, significantly higher than the average for south Bedfordshire.

The college offers programmes in 13 of the 15 sector subject areas. The majority of learners are enrolled on programmes in information and communication technology (ICT), preparation for life and work, and business, administration and law. In 2007/08, 50 learners followed work-based learning apprenticeships and 115 entry to employment (E2E) programmes.

Previous inspection

The college was last inspected in April 2008 when its effectiveness and capacity to improve were judged to be satisfactory. Achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management were all judged to be satisfactory. Of the sector subject areas inspected, health, public services and care, arts, media and publishing, and preparation for life and work were judged to be good. Hairdressing and beauty therapy and business, administration and law were judged to be satisfactory with ICT judged to be inadequate. This is the first of two reinspection monitoring visits, to monitor progress since the previous inspection prior to the reinspection of the inadequate provision.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in improving learners' outcomes, with a particular focus on improving success rates for adult learners at level 2?	Reasonable progress
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For learners aged 16-18 success rates improved in 2007/08, although success rates for the recently introduced GCE A and AS level courses in science and mathematics, art and social sciences are below national averages. Actions to improve performance are underway in 2008/09, with the appointment of a new programme leader and two new teachers. For adult learners, although success rates improved at levels 2 and 3, they remain low at level 2. Whilst retention on the ICT level 2 programmes based in the learning shops had an adverse impact on success rates at this level, retention improved for learners aged 16-18 and adults at level 3. Where success rates were low for learners on construction courses in their first year of operation at the Kingsland Centre in Houghton Regis, more thorough pre-entry advice and assessment ensures learners are placed on the appropriate level course. Training for staff in this area is focused appropriately on supporting these learners more effectively. Retention at the time of the monitoring visit indicates further improvement when compared with a similar period in the previous year.

Key skills success rates improved in 2007/08 for the third successive year, but the college recognises achievements were missed due to portfolio non-completion. Success rates for communications remain low, particularly at level 2. Work based learning framework success rates for apprenticeships improved significantly in 2007/08 to well above the national average. The self-assessment report identifies the areas of underperformance clearly and has appropriate strategies in place to effect improvement.

Quality of provision

Has the college maintained the good employer links and what progress has been made in addressing the insufficient opportunities for work experience for learners aged 16-18?	Significant progress
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The good employer links have been maintained and strengthened further and the college has made significant progress in identifying work experience opportunities for 16-18 learners. The college has expanded its Train to Gain programme from 35 learners at the previous inspection to 135 currently. The target set for increasing the number of learners involved in work experience has been exceeded. Learners in hairdressing and beauty therapy, construction, engineering, business, administration and law, and those on care programmes have increased opportunities to gain work experience through local employers. ICT learners work with the college ICT team to develop their vocational skills in supporting IT users in the college. The college provides a consultancy service to employers through a formal business review and training needs analysis. This has allowed the college to identify work placements for E2E learners, apprenticeship opportunities and college courses. The challenging

employer engagement target set by the college to develop business links has been exceeded significantly.

What progress has been made in improving the analysis of the outcomes from quality assurance arrangements, including the impact of equality and diversity measures in lessons?	Reasonable progress
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The college has taken external advice and guidance through consultation over best practice with other colleges. Development of the management calendar provides the college with the opportunity to support the planning and self-assessment cycle within planned timescales. Heads of department now have a clearly defined role in reviewing reports before the development of an overall college self-assessment report. The report is now shared through peer reviews with four other colleges and the college governors, facilitating a more critical approach to judgements made. The post-inspection action plan addresses the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection clearly and a significant number of the targets set have been achieved. For quality improvement activities the college has set clearly defined targets. However, it is too early to measure the impact on learners' outcomes.

The college has made reasonable progress in identifying the impact of equality and diversity measures in lessons. Schemes of work and lesson plans are reviewed and identify equality and diversity activities more clearly. The college has increased the number of support workers for visually and hearing impaired learners and more learners are now supported in mainstream classes. The college is active in seeking out best practice to guide and influence their equality and diversity strategy.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the inadequate provision in ICT?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates for 16-18 learners in ICT 2007/08 of 74% show an improvement of seven percentage points compared with the previous year. Key skills success rates are, however, low. For adult learners on part-time courses at the college's learning shops, success rates fell in 2007/08 to a low 49% as many learners left the course before completing. Retention for adult learners starting part-time ICT courses in 2008/09 is high currently.

The college began a restructuring of the computing section in January 2009 with the aims of improving the quality of provision for part-time ICT learners, bringing the management of the department and learning shops under one manager, closing the learning shop at Leighton Buzzard and appointing new staff to the remaining learning centre in Dunstable. Weekly meetings, led by the departmental manager enable progress to be reviewed more closely and training to take place regularly. New induction procedures are in place for learners with each receiving an individual tutorial to assess their suitability for the broader range of programmes now on offer. Learners' progress is more closely monitored with the introduction of individual

learning plans, which contain milestones for achievement against agreed end dates. Short taught sessions and online resources available through the college's virtual learning environment broaden the range of delivery methods to better suit individuals' needs.

What progress has been made in addressing the unsatisfactory strategic and development planning?	Reasonable progress
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Work is underway on a new strategic plan for 2008-12, involving staff, managers and governors through a range of planning days and staff conference events. The development plan for 2008/09 is better framed with clear responsibilities, milestones to be achieved and target review dates. Heads of department work more closely together in their planning to deliver agreed targets. Monitoring has been improved with specific individuals responsible for agreed actions. Early triggers for identifying courses at risk of underperforming have been strengthened, with interventions led by the quality manager and her team.

What progress has been made in implementing and measuring the impact of the college's learner involvement strategy?	Significant progress
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The college has implemented a range of activities to provide learners with opportunities to involve themselves in the college's improvement arrangements. Learners can feedback their experiences through a wide range of meetings, attendance at the student council, suggestion boxes and questionnaires. Their comments are included in course reviews and used to inform improvements. Comments are invited from learners on the quality of teaching and learning on ICT programmes, which is provided as feedback to tutors. Student governors and student course representatives are involved actively in formal meetings with college staff and managers. Student governors are also invited to participate in interviewing new staff. Outcomes of learners' feedback include the introduction of a common room, a range of lunchtime enrichment activities and changes to course content.