

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Oaklands College

Date of visit: 20 April 2009

### Context

Oaklands College (the college) is a large general further education college and is one of four colleges serving Hertfordshire. The college has four core campuses across three local authority districts in mid and south Hertfordshire: Borehamwood, St Albans City, Smallford and Welwyn Garden City. In 2007/08, college data shows there were 10,152 learners, of which 4,028 were aged 16 to 18 (around 71% of the weighted total cohort) and 6,124 enrolments were adults. Around 14% of learners were from a minority ethnic background, higher than the average for mid and south Hertfordshire, and 49% of learners were female.

The college offers programmes in all 15 sector subject areas. The majority of learners are enrolled on programmes in preparation for life and work, arts, media and publishing, health, public services and care, and construction and the built environment. In 2007/08, 163 learners followed work-based learning apprenticeships. From September 2008 the college has its own Train to Gain contract and an employer responsive contract for national vocational qualifications (NVQ) in the workplace.

The college's mission is, 'Oaklands provides outstanding learning opportunities and training solutions within a vibrant inclusive college experience, leading to recognised qualifications and outcomes that contribute to personal development, and the economic growth and social well-being of our community'.

### Last inspection and AAV

The college was last inspected in October 2005 and was judged to be satisfactory overall with good capacity to improve. Curriculum areas were judged to be satisfactory or better, with the exception of construction and the built environment which was judged to be inadequate. At the reinspection of the construction and built environment curriculum area in March 2008 provision was judged to be good and the college was judged to be making reasonable progress in improving learner outcomes and other aspects investigated on the reinspection monitoring visit. The college was judged to be making significant progress to improve accommodation.

## Achievement and standards

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| What progress has been made in improving learners' outcomes? What progress has been made to improve success rates for adults at level 2? | Reasonable progress |
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Success rates on long programmes for learners aged 16 to 18 and for adults continued to improve in 2007/08 and at 77% were slightly above the national average. For learners aged 16 to 18 on level 2 programmes success rates are high. Retention is improving at all levels and is high for level 1 learners and for 16 to 18 year olds on level 2 programmes. However, achievement declined on level 1 programmes in 2007/08, due largely to poor management and non-completion on construction multi-skills programmes. Learners now follow one learning aim instead of two and are monitored more closely. In-year data suggests much improved achievement. The college recognises that success rates on level 2 adult provision have not improved in the past three years, and that achievement fell in 2007/08. This is due in part to poorly managed NVQ programmes delivered through external partnership arrangements. Two partners with a larger proportion of learners went into liquidation during the year, exacerbating the impact on success rates. On shorter NVQ courses offered through the partnership arrangements, learners continuing past their agreed completion date had an adverse impact on the success rate, which has declined steeply and is low. On very short programmes success rates declined due to underachievement on a food hygiene programme. Close analysis of success rates and performance through the college's performance report, identifies programmes where performance is good or declining enabling appropriate targeting on improvements at course level. To address success rates below minimum levels of performance on A levels, a very focused strategy is in place to raise achievement. In-year module results on the AS law programme, for example, indicate an improvement in achievement.

The college compares the success rates of minority ethnic learners as a whole to other learners but recognises that its analysis of success rates by specific minority ethnic grouping, including for White Other, its largest minority ethnic adult group, is insufficient. Success rates for adult learners from some minority ethnic groups, such as those from a Black African heritage, declined in 2007/08 and are low. For learners with difficulties and/or disabilities success rates are better than the college average. While success rates for males and females aged 16 to 18 are improving and are similar, success rates for adult males fell in 2007/08. In 2008/09 the college is rightly focusing on improving achievement.

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| What progress has been made in improving the poor timely completion rates on NVQ programmes and success rates across the work based learning provision? | Reasonable progress |
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In 2007/08 there was an overall decline in work based learning success rates. The overall advanced apprenticeship programme success rate declined to 21% and for

apprentices the success rate fell by two points to 50%, well below national averages. Timely success rates are broadly satisfactory. The college is subject to a Notice to Improve in construction work based learning (carpentry). A strong focus on restructuring and improving work based learning has resulted in a number of changes which benefit learners. They now receive more accurate projected completion dates, initial assessment and induction processes have improved, and a member of staff is employed to provide additional support to trainees. The recording of the progress learners make is more thorough and there is good understanding of the rate of progress learners make in their training programmes. Progress is monitored more carefully to identify learners who are making slow progress and to allocate appropriate support. Senior managers receive monthly reports which better inform them of the learners' progress. It is too soon to judge the overall effectiveness of the new measures in place.

### Quality of provision

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| What progress has been made in addressing the insufficiently challenging teaching on level 3 programmes | Reasonable progress |
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In 2007/08 the proportion of good or better teaching improved further from 70% in 2006/07 to 74%, just missing the college's target of 75%. The college's ambitious target of no inadequate teaching was missed and this increased slightly from 4% to 5% (13 lessons). Appropriate support is in place for these teachers. Through analysis of observations records and departmental audits, the college identified issues around insufficient challenge for learners on level 3 programmes. To address this the college was successful in obtaining external funding to support a project involving advanced practitioners, teachers on level 3 programmes and learners, to develop strategies to challenge and involve learners more effectively. Evaluation of the project is planned for the end of the academic year.

Peer observation weeks introduced in 2007/08, to enable more informal experimentation with different approaches to teaching, have been received favourably by teachers, but not all departments have taken part. In 2008/09 analysis of observations show 73% of teachers are graded good or better currently, with around a quarter of teacher observations remaining to be undertaken in this term. Staff development for teachers is now more sharply focused around six sessions on specific teaching and learning themes, repeated termly. Teachers also receive individual support through a small team of highly enthusiastic senior advanced practitioners who work across the college, and from advanced practitioners and subject learning coaches centred in curriculum teams. Communication with heads of department is reported to be good.

## Leadership and management

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| What progress has been made in improving the ineffective management of the key skills strategy? | Reasonable progress |
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The college recognises that participation in key skills in 2007/08 was very low, that the high success rates must be seen in this context and that success in embedding key skills within lessons has been only partially successful. A restructure of the management of key skills and basic skills has taken place, under the banner of 'functional skills' and under one head of department, in preparation for the future introduction of functional skills across the college. New cross-college appointments of lead coordinators for mathematics, information communication technology (ICT) and communication have been made to better provide central support and a more effective oversight of quality assurance. At the time of the monitoring visit 3000 key skills and around 600 enrolments for functional skills were recorded, a significant improvement on the previous year.

A greater emphasis has been placed on development and support for staff, with increased numbers acquiring level 2 skills and studying for a level 5 qualification in embedding key skills in teaching. Heads of department now have clearer responsibilities for delivery, quality assurance and assessment of key skills, including agreed targets with senior management. Some targets, specifically around learner achievement, are insufficiently precise. Closer monitoring of functional skills takes place, with the college monitoring test pass rates and portfolio completion more effectively. More staff are qualified to carry out internal verification to ensure portfolios meet awarding body standards. The functional skills pilot has been extended across the college, and includes A level provision. It is too early to comment on the impact of changes to the management of key skills on learners' success rates.

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| What progress has been made in improving the insufficient use of research and data analysis to inform curriculum planning? | Significant progress |
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Following a recent reorganisation, the college has restructured and simplified the procedure and processes for developing curriculum planning activities. Heads of department are more involved in establishing and justifying to senior managers their proposed curriculum changes and developments. Using appropriate research data on national, regional and local priorities, curriculum development plans include an analysis of the needs and skills requirements for local employers, informing opportunities for curriculum expansion well. Managers have received training in the use of data analysis to support them in this task. A flexible approach to the curriculum offer allows opportunities to alter the range of programmes at short

notice during enrolment periods. Regular meetings of the curriculum management group enable close management of the curriculum during the planning process.

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| What progress has been made in improving the leadership and management of and underdeveloped quality assurance systems across work based learning? | Reasonable progress |
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The college is currently restructuring work based learning quality improvement systems. Consultation and reviews with external providers and other colleges is enabling the college to have a clearer understanding of best practice for work based programmes when revising its processes. Improvements to the tracking and recording system provide a more accurate and detailed picture of learner progress. Currently no observation of assessors takes place as part of the college's observation process, other than during peer group review activities between other providers and during the college's corporate audit scheme of curriculum areas which takes place every two years. Not all employers are involved in the learner review process. Assessor standardisation meetings take place more regularly, with a lead internal verifier appointed recently. Senior managers receive regular monthly reports on the performance of work based learners which better inform them of projected work based learning success rates. Managers are now confident that the monitoring of progress has improved and work to improve quality assurance systems is ongoing with further improvements planned.