

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college:       Writtle College  
Date of visit:         10-11 February 2009

### Context

Writtle College is a medium sized higher education (HE) institution with substantive further education (FE) provision. It specialises in land-based education. It is a partner institution of the University of Essex. The college has two campuses, a main campus at Writtle, near Chelmsford and a second campus at Shuttleworth in Bedfordshire. Both campuses include substantial estates and a range of specialist land-based units, including farms, animal centres and horticultural units. The college's main catchment areas are Essex and Bedfordshire but its specialist provision recruits students more widely from the East of England and South Eastern areas.

The social and economic environments around both campuses are favourable, with lower unemployment rates than regionally and nationally. The local populations are predominantly of white British heritage. The proportion of pupils achieving five GCSE grades at A\* to C grades in both areas is broadly in line with the national average.

The college offers further education provision in nine sector subject areas, but with small numbers in most, except land-based subjects, sports studies, engineering and preparation for life and work. The college provides work-based learning in land-based and engineering subjects.

The college enrolls approximately one thousand 16-18 year old students each year and slightly more than one thousand adults. Around half of the full-time students study at level 3. The number of work-based learners enrolled in 2007/08 was 101. Just under two thirds of students are female and a few students are from minority ethnic groups.

The college's mission is 'transforming lives and the environment through inspiring education'. It is part of a Centre of Vocational Excellence in horticultural technologies with two other colleges.

The college was last inspected in May 2008. At that inspection, the college's overall effectiveness, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, together with curriculum provision in animal care and veterinary nursing and in horticulture and floristry were judged to be inadequate. The college's capacity to improve and curriculum provision in agriculture, countryside and fish management, and in equine studies were satisfactory.

## Achievement and standards

What progress has been made with improving success rates, particularly on level 3 courses?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

The college's overall success rate improved by 12 percentage points to 77% in 2007/08, enabling it to meet all of its success rate targets except that for adult students on level 1 courses. This improvement resulted from an increase in the college's achievement rate; course retention has not improved since the previous inspection and has declined for students aged 16-18 on courses at level 2 and level 3. However, recent in-year retention data provided by the college indicate some improvement. Where value-added information is available, it suggests that students are making the progress expected of them, based on their starting points.

For students aged 16-18, success rates have improved at all levels but this improvement has been most marked at level 1 and level 2. The success rate of 85% at level 1 is close to the most recently published national average figure but at level 2 the success rate of 75% is below it. The success rate has increased more modestly at level 3 and at 73% is low.

The success rate for adult students at level 1 declined to 81% in 2007/08 but remained above average. At level 2 the success rate of 80% is well above average whilst at level 3 the success rate of 68% is close to the average.

The majority of students enrolled on level 3 courses are following national diplomas. Success rates improved on two-thirds of these courses in 2007/08 but remain low in agriculture, fish management and horticulture (three year course). The proportion of students who achieved high grades on level 3 courses improved in 2007/08 and is satisfactory.

Key skills success rates have improved and are now good. This improvement has been matched by work-based learners; success rates for apprentices and advanced apprentices are both well above average.

There are few learners from minority ethnic groups. College data indicates that students from different groups achieve as well as other students.

Has the proportion of students who progress to Higher Education increased?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

The college has set an appropriate target of 40% for progression to HE for 2008/09. In 2007/08 the proportion of students who progressed from college FE to college HE programmes improved but was still low at 15%. A further 20% of students progressed to HE courses at other establishments, an increase of 7%.

The college has extended the tutorial programme to provide more insights into HE and improved the provision of individual progression interviews but has not yet provided an evaluation of how effective these interviews have been. Proposed

changes to the curriculum, for example the introduction of diploma courses and the development of a joint degree with a local university have been made with the intention of improving progression into HE.

Current college data does not provide a reliable measure of the proportion of learners who are progressing into appropriate employment on completion of their college course as an alternative to HE.

### Quality of provision

Has the use of planning to support learning improved, particularly in animal care and veterinary nursing and horticulture and floristry?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

Since the previous inspection, the college has put in place appropriate guidance and monitoring procedures which ensure that the planning of lessons is more consistent and thorough. A new, more detailed lesson planning framework has been introduced that provides an appropriate emphasis on learning outcomes and objectives. As a consequence, good practice in lesson planning has been identified and shared, including some effective college-wide staff development sessions. However, the college is not yet able to demonstrate fully that improvements in planning have influenced the extent to which teaching caters for the needs of students of all abilities, and in particular the most able.

What progress has been made with the setting and monitoring of progress against targets?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

The college has improved its target setting procedures and the monitoring of progress towards meeting them. Targets are generally sufficiently challenging. Intended actions are clearly related to college priorities and are also reflected in targets at subject and individual levels. Typically, courses are set demanding targets for retention and achievement which are monitored regularly, both by course teams and senior managers. Early indications are that standards have begun to improve as a result.

The college has undertaken much recent work to improve the tutorial system and to ensure that it operates more consistently across the college. Students' tutorial entitlement has been clarified and defined by the introduction of a college-wide tutorial framework and students welcome this. Online systems now ensure that all tutors and lecturers have access to tutorial records, and that students can access reports easily. Group and individual tutorials are better planned and implemented so that many students not only have a clearer idea of how they are progressing, but also what they should do to improve. However, the clarity of student performance targets is still too variable and deadlines are not always identified. Whilst good practice is evident in some courses, targets in others do not yet provide a reliable base against which to measure student performance.

## Leadership and management

Has the effectiveness of college quality assurance improved?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

The monitoring of teaching and learning is now more extensive and systematic. Lesson observations are more rigorous and have enabled the college to develop a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching. Lesson observations also place an appropriate emphasis on learning, but opportunities to assess the progress made by students in lessons are often missed.

The college has organised staff development sessions to tackle the weaker aspects of teaching and learning identified through lesson observation and provided individual mentoring sessions for teachers who need more support to improve their performance. The college is not yet able to demonstrate significant improvements to teaching and learning but has set itself challenging targets to increase the proportion of lessons graded as good or better.

The college has been successful in improving the monitoring of other aspects of its work. Senior managers and governors scrutinise the work of departments in much greater detail and hold curriculum managers to account. The quality of curriculum self-evaluation has improved and there are regular college-wide audits of the tutorial programme. The monitoring of assessment has also improved.

Are curriculum managers making effective use of management information?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

The use of management information by curriculum managers has improved. Managers have received training in how to analyse and present information to provide a more critical assessment of course performance. Managers use the information to grade the performance of each course and to provide challenging course targets.

Have there been any improvements in accommodation and resources since the previous inspection?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

Although the college has not been involved in any significant building work since the previous inspection, accommodation has improved. Changes are most evident at the Cow Watering campus, where the provision of a new riding surface and farriery area and clean, well managed animal care facilities have done much to improve accommodation which was judged to be unsatisfactory at the previous inspection. Improvements are also evident on other sites. Classroom and specialist accommodation have been decorated and equipped in some cases with interactive white boards and improved Information Communication Technology resources. Some previously underutilised areas, for example in horticulture, have been brought into use to provide better practical facilities for students. The college has given a high priority to ensuring that students can work safely in practical areas. Staff show much

greater ownership of the areas they work in and are now proud to display the work produced by their students in rooms and walkways. The college is also well aware of the limitations of its site and plans to redevelop accommodation are well advanced.