

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: York College
Date of visit: 24 February 2009

Context

York College was created in April 1999 following the merger of York College of Further and Higher Education with York Sixth Form College. The college's mission is 'to achieve excellence as the leading provider of education and training in the City of York and surrounding area'. In September 2007, the College moved to new buildings at its Sim Balk Lane site.

The college is the largest provider of 16 to 19 education and work-based learning in the sub-region and offers a wide range of subjects, levels and modes of study. It has approximately 10,000 students of whom 3,400 are in full-time further education, 700 are in work-based learning, 480 in higher education, 150 are international students and over 800 are on Train to Gain programmes. The college is recognised as a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in a number of areas including rail and signal engineering, stonemasonry, hospitality and tourism.

Some 3.3% of students at the college are from minority ethnic groups. In York, just 2.2% of the population is from minority ethnic groups compared with 4.4% in the region and 5.6% nationally, based on the UK Race Statistics (May 2004). In 2007, 67% of 16-year-old pupils in York gained five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above, compared with the national average of 60.3%.

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in improving success rates, particularly at levels 1 and 2, as shown by the 2008 success rates?	Significant progress
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Success rates at levels 1, 2 and 3 for both age groups improved in 2008. The most significant improvements were seen at level 1, where success rates improved by 14%. For learners aged 16 to 18, this moved the success rate from well below the national rate to broadly average and for learners aged 19 and over, the success rate moved from below to above the national average. At level 2, the success rate improved markedly for learners aged 16 to 18 from below the national rate to broadly average. For learners aged 19 and above the improvement was less marked

but moved the success rate much closer to the national average. Actions are in place to increase the rate of improvement further here.

At level 3, for learners aged 16 to 18, the success rate increased at a greater rate than the national rate and remained above the national rate. For learners aged 19 and over, the level 3 success rate increased to above the national rate. Success rates on short courses improved slightly and plans are in place to support further developments in this area. Retention figures to date for the current year show a strong continuation of the improving trend.

What progress has been made in improving provision and success rates in work-based learning and Train to Gain?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection, success rates in work-based learning were broadly satisfactory. Since then overall and timely success rates on apprenticeship programmes have improved significantly. In 2007/08, for advanced apprentices, overall success rates are at 67% and timely success rates are at 56%. For apprentices, overall success rates are at 69% and timely success rates are at 66% for the same time period. Some sector subject areas, such as construction crafts, hairdressing and electrical, have improved both overall and timely success rates to between 75% and 83%.

Train to Gain success rates are high at 83%. The management of work-based learning has improved. A new learner review sheet focuses the learner, assessor and employer on targets to be achieved. The employer's role is better defined and they are more actively involved in the apprentice's learning programme. Management improvement strategies are applied to work-based learning and data are well used to monitor performance.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in improving the management and success rates for key skills?	Reasonable progress
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Within key skills there has been close monitoring of schemes of work, examination entries and portfolio completion, with an emphasis on looking at the progress of each individual. Although these processes were in place before 2007/08 they were refined in that academic year. The positive impact of this strategy was seen in a marked improvement in overall success rates. However, this improvement was not seen consistently across all levels. The success rate at level 1 was 76%, that at level 2 was 56%, and at level 3 it was 27%. There were also differences between the success rates in different sector subject areas.

To continue the upward trend and address remaining issues, such as the success rate at level 3, the college has put a number of initiatives in place this academic year. First, there is a revised strategy relating to course enrolment, with key skills being seen as part of the broader skills development agenda. Second, from September 2008, all students were screened at enrolment to allow early matching to the most appropriate course and level. In addition, students on level 3 programmes are no longer automatically enrolled on level 3 key skills courses. For the next academic year it is planned for students to complete their screening pre-enrolment to support correct course placement. Although early signs for these initiatives are positive, it is too early to see their full impact.

What progress has been made by the college to ensure that provision continues to meet the needs and interests of learners well?	Reasonable progress
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The college continues to meet the needs and interests of learners well. The college is responsive to the needs of its community when developing provision. Partnerships are strong and the college is a key player in new initiatives across the city. Staff have worked closely with Connexions to develop provision for young adults not in education, employment or training. Progression rates are good.

The college now better ensures that initial information, advice and guidance are thorough and that learners are placed on the correct programme. In-year retention rates are very high and show that there are fewer learners leaving their courses early. The well established enrichment programme continues to offer learners an extensive range of activities that include trips, work placements, and an accredited volunteering scheme. An extended project allows learners to take additional qualifications to enhance their employability and social skills.

What progress has the college made in ensuring student services and learning support consolidate and build on the strengths seen at the previous inspection?	Reasonable progress
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This area has built well on the strengths seen at the previous inspection. All support services are now managed by the same person, facilitating communication and the sharing of good practice. Within additional learning support, on-line records have been developed, which allow staff to pick up on issues much more quickly and act proactively. There is also greater targeting of support to groups where there are high levels of need.

Student services was restructured in January 2008 and this has allowed staff to develop their specialist roles and spend more time with students. A number of strategies have been used to raise the awareness of student services and an analysis has been carried out to show the positive impact of contact with student services on

successful outcomes. The newly introduced heads of study have been very helpful as a source of information and dealing with academic concerns. There is an improved referral system for counselling, an increased number of successful applications to support funds, and centralisation of tutorial support resources.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made by the college to implement well developed strategies to improve success rates?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection ‘insufficiently well developed strategies to improve success rates’ was identified as a key area for improvement. The college has made significant progress in defining and implementing improvement strategies. The college management team has been restructured. Previously, one senior manager had overall responsibility for teaching and learning. Now all four senior managers are responsible for teaching and learning in specific aspects of the curriculum. A strong focus on improving teaching and learning has been well supported through a focused staff development programme. The college has actively sought partner colleges to work with to share and adopt best practice.

The accountability and responsibility of teaching staff has been raised. Some curriculum areas have been restructured or realigned to have a more positive impact on improvement. For example, music and maths are now in the same department in an effort to better share good practice from mathematics with music tutors. The curriculum area for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is now managed by learning support. The curriculum delivery model has been changed to better meet learners’ needs in some areas. The monitoring of performance is strong. Data are better understood by staff and well used at monthly review meetings at all levels within the college to identify good performance and underperformance. Good performance by staff is regularly celebrated and interventions to improve underperformance are very timely.