

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Lakes College, West Cumbria
Date of visit: 3 March 2009

Context

Lakes College is a medium-sized general further education college located on the west coast of Cumbria between Workington and Whitehaven. The college draws its students from a wide geographical area. It operates predominantly from a modern, purpose-built site with additional buildings for construction just under half a mile away. The main catchment area falls within the district of Cumbria and includes the boroughs of Copeland and Allerdale, with a population of around 170,000. Much of the area is sparsely populated and has pockets of socio-economic deprivation. Unemployment rates are lower than the national average. The college is a part of the Cumbria Colleges Collaboration initiated in 2002, which includes all four of the region's general further education colleges. Since the previous inspection, a new Principal has been appointed and a new college structure was introduced in September 2007.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in raising success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 and have good outcomes for learners aged 19 and over been sustained?	Reasonable progress
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At 76% the overall success rate for learners aged 16 to 18 on long courses remained broadly average in 2008. In spite of good improvement in overall retention rates, which are now just above average, the overall achievement rate declined by four percentage points to 86% and is broadly average. This was due to students underperforming on a small number of courses in beauty, engineering and childcare. The college has taken steps to address this underperformance; data provided to inspectors indicate signs of improved achievement for students currently on these courses. Standards are very high for this age group on courses in information and communication technology (ICT) and arts and media.

Improvement in success rates for level 1 provision has been sustained and, at 80% in 2008, the overall success rate was higher than average. In particular, success rates on National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 1 provision are high. Improvement in success rates for level 2 provision has been maintained and is broadly average overall at 73%. Success rates on NVQs at this level are low. Improvement was also maintained for level 3 provision and at 73% in 2008 the overall success rate was broadly average.

Success rates for key skills qualifications taken by learners aged 16 to 18 show very good improvement over time. For example, on level 2 courses the success rate improved from 53% in 2006, to 74% in 2008. Students' achievements on level 1 key skills are particularly impressive; around three quarters of students successfully complete qualifications in communication and application of number.

Outcomes for pupils aged 14 to 16 remain strong. In 2008 a high proportion of pupils left with a qualification and almost two thirds progressed on to full-time courses at the college.

Short course success rates improved in 2008 and were high at 91% for learners aged 16 to 18 and 94% for adult learners.

The college has sustained good outcomes for adult learners. In spite of a previously downward trend relative to national averages, the overall success rate improved to 80% in 2008 and is higher than average. This was due to improvements in both retention and achievement rates. Success rates on level 1 provision improved significantly and are well above average. Success rates on level 2 provision are also above average. In 2008 the success rate on level 3 dipped slightly and was broadly average.

<p>What progress has been made in relation to the college's employer engagement strategy and in raising success rates on work-based learning provision?</p>	<p>Significant progress</p>
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The college engages very effectively with employers who access a broad range of successful training. The college is proactive in ensuring that its portfolio of provision is closely aligned to employers' specific business needs. Feedback from employers is used well to inform planning and evaluation of work based learning and training provision. Surveys carried out by the college indicate high levels of satisfaction amongst employers who attribute improvements in productivity and reduced staff absence to the high quality training provided by the college.

Staff involved in workforce development and external relations are highly enthusiastic and committed to continuous improvement. The high level of collaboration between these teams and the college's curriculum areas has resulted in significant improvements in outcomes for young people and adults on work-based training programmes. Continuing professional development has been used well to ensure that all staff involved in the management and delivery of work-based learning are well qualified and skilled in what they do. The college's strategy for employer engagement also adds value to work carried out in curriculum areas, for example through an initiative to enhance students' enterprise skills.

The headline success rate for all apprenticeship programmes shows good improvement over the last three years from 58% in 2006, to 72% in 2008. Overall

timely success rates have also improved and, at 55% overall in 2008, are higher than the national average. Outcomes for learners on programmes in health and care are consistently strong. Success rates on programmes in engineering are low.

The overall success rate for advanced apprenticeship programmes shows significant improvement and was well above average at 73% in 2008. However, the timely success rate shows a declining trend for the low number of learners on these programmes. The college is addressing this issue by ensuring that learners who start at different points in the year have a more realistic timeframe for completing their technical certificate.

At 71% in 2008 the overall success rate for apprenticeship programmes was higher than average and a significant improvement on the previous year. The timely success rate was also above average at 60%. Timely success rates for learners aged 19 and over are a particular strength.

The college has a thriving and growing Train to Gain provision. Until September 2008 this provision was delivered as part of a regional partnership; the college now has a direct contract for some 1,160 learners. The overall success rate for Train to Gain courses delivered by the college in 2008 was 87%.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in raising the quality of teaching and learning and in embedding the use of information and learning technology in classroom practice?	Significant progress
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The self-assessment report (SAR) judges the quality of teaching and learning to be good; there is much evidence to support this. Teaching and learning is a key priority for the college, and the teaching and learning strategy underpins the clear improvement in success rates. There is a passion for teaching and learning throughout the college which is contagious.

The college's teaching and learning strategy is well considered and the process for the observation of teaching and learning (OTL) is robust. There are plans to strengthen it further. Strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning include: the appointment of a teaching and learning leader; rigorous follow-up actions for lessons judged to be inadequate; close working with the Cumbrian collaboration programme to provide opportunities for paired observations; and tighter moderation of OTL grades.

College figures show the proportion of good and outstanding teaching improved from 78% in 2007 to 80% in 2008. The amount of inadequate teaching is low. The SAR identifies strengths and incisive weaknesses in teaching and learning. Actions to eradicate the weaknesses are securely in place.

More recently, the college has introduced eight teaching and learning mentor posts and three lead assessors. The work of this newly established team involves helping to plan courses and lessons, e-learning developments, post observation guidance and support and sharing best practice. The team has begun its work in earnest. A 'mentor' area on the college's virtual learning environment (VLE) and mentors in hair and beauty and in sport have been effective in disseminating good practice in the use of information technology and e-learning across the college. Work is currently underway to introduce handbooks which are tailored to the individual needs of new teachers.

What progress has been made in ensuring individual learning plans are of a consistently high quality and how effectively do they contribute to learners' progress?	Significant progress
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The last annual assessment visit acknowledged that the college had yet to improve individual target-setting for learners but at the same time it recognised that measures to tackle the issue were in place. Since the last visit, the college has made significant progress in the use of standardised individual learning plans (ILPs) and target-setting, using the Virtual Managed Environment (VME). At the start of the year all students have a one-to-one meeting with their tutor. At this initial review meeting, targets are set and usually negotiated. Targets relate to both personal and academic goals. In most cases the targets are measurable, but there are a few examples where targets and actions to improve are too vague for the outcomes to be measurable. Regular reviewing of students' progress is recorded electronically which enables the information to be shared with all relevant staff. This is enabling subject teachers and additional learning support tutors to plan work to meet individual student's needs much more effectively. Subject ILPs are used whenever there is an issue which is interfering with a student's learning and progress. Subject ILPs are reviewed regularly and progress against targets is recorded electronically. College policy also states that ILPs can be used where tutors consider that a student is capable of more challenging work. However, this aspect of ILPs is not yet widespread. Currently, ILPs recorded on the VME are not directly accessible by individual students. The college is working to address this issue.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in embedding new college structures especially at middle management level?	Significant progress
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The Principal and senior managers have led the college very successfully through a period of substantial structural change. There has been a relentless focus aligning management systems and processes to the learner experience. The college theme of 'journey from good to great' drives planning and decision-making. Since the last visit, significant steps have been taken to address weaknesses identified in leadership and management in a small number of curriculum areas. Staff development has been

targeted very astutely. Consequently, managers at all levels are equipped with the skills, attitudes and confidence to carry out their roles effectively and efficiently. Management development is given a particularly high priority and managers' leadership capacity has been strengthened significantly. Middle leaders are impressive; they have vision and clarity of purpose which is shared within their teams. A climate of honesty and openness means that weaknesses are quickly picked up, targeted and eradicated. Communication in the college is good. Roles and responsibilities at middle management level are now clearly understood; the course team leader role and programme manager role complement each other well. The self-assessment process is highly inclusive and ensures a strong sense of ownership of both strengths and areas for improvement within curriculum areas. Management information is used competently and its analysis results in thorough and rigorous evaluation.

<p>What progress has been made in embedding the college's learner involvement strategy and its impact on outcomes for learners?</p>	<p>Reasonable progress</p>
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The college demonstrates a clear commitment to providing appropriate resources to enable and encourage students' involvement and active decision making in college life. Some of the mechanisms used to engage students include: the students association which all students belong to unless they choose to opt out; tutor groups that have elected representatives who attend focus groups to discuss specific issues; student councils that meet at least twice per term; learner voice conferences; meet the principal sessions; students' perception of courses; and inter-college competitions. The learner involvement strategy is clear, stating the college's obligation to involve the learner. The impact of the strategy will be evaluated through the annual self-assessment process. Several changes to courses and other aspects of provision have already been made as a result of student feedback. However, the college has yet to consider how their learner involvement strategy impacts directly on learners, for example, by identifying how well the strategy impacts on students' personal development, their contribution to the community, their economic well-being and other aspects.