

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Northumberland College

Date of visit: 28 January 2009

### Context

Northumberland College is the only general further education (GFE) college in the county. It has a main site in Ashington and additional sites at Kirkley Hall, Alnwick, Blyth and Berwick-upon-Tweed. The college offers outreach provision across the county using its learning bus. It has one Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) for inbound tourism. The college's mission is 'to provide education, training and services that are of high quality to meet the needs of people and industry in Northumberland and beyond'.

The college was last inspected in January 2006. At that inspection the overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, and leadership and management were satisfactory. The quality of provision was good. Of the six curriculum areas inspected, three were graded good and three were satisfactory.

### Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in improving success rates on college based provision?	Reasonable progress
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Reasonable progress has been made in improving success rates. In 2007/08, the overall success rate for long courses improved by 4% to 73%, which is around the national average for similar colleges. On long courses for learners aged 16 to 18, the success rates improved at all levels in 2007/08 and all are now in line with national averages. On courses for those aged 19+, the success rates on level 1 and 3 courses improved in 2007/08 and are now in line with national averages. However, the rate declined on level 2 courses and is below the national average.

Pass rates have improved steadily at all levels over the last three years. The college recognises that the pace of improvement in retention has been too slow. However, appropriate plans are in place that are focused on closer monitoring of students at risk of underachieving and more rigorous review of underperforming courses.

What progress has there been in improving success rates on apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships?	Significant progress
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Significant progress has been made in improving success rates on apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships. The overall success rate for all apprenticeships has improved from 36% to 64% in the last 3 years. This represents an improvement from 13% below the national average in 2005/06, to the national average in 2007/08. Similar improvements have been made in the timely rate, which has improved from 12% below, to around the national average.

When the overall rates are disaggregated into apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships and by sector subject area, similar improvements are evident. The college has carried out a detailed analysis and evaluation of the performance in all areas of work-based learning. Appropriate actions are in place to make improvements where rates are lower.

Improvements in success rates have coincided with carefully planned and well-executed actions taken by the college. For example: changes to enhance the management structure; relocating the team to improve communications; more effective monitoring of individual learners; and better use of data to inform decision making.

#### Quality of provision

What developments have taken place since the last monitoring visit to improve the quality of teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress
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Since the last monitoring visit the college has revised its arrangements for monitoring, evaluating and improving teaching and learning to place priority on increasing the proportion of good and better lessons. Teachers judged to be satisfactory or inadequate are provided with prompt support. Training for observers has been carried out to ensure that the feedback they provide to teachers is clear and constructive and that judgements are standardised. A system of peer-observation and effective mentoring of new teachers are also supporting improvement.

The outcomes from observations, course review and self-assessment are drawn together to inform staff development programmes that are designed to respond to the areas for improvement identified in individual departments. A good range of events facilitated by college staff and external consultants has taken place. This has included a programme of activity to increase the use of e-learning.

## Leadership and management

At the previous inspection the incoherent strategic leadership and direction was an area for improvement. What progress has been made in setting a clear strategic direction?	Reasonable progress
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Reasonable progress has been made in improving the leadership of the college. Since the previous inspection, a new principal and two senior post holders have joined the college. The governing body has been strengthened and is now more representative of the communities the college serves. The management of the college has been restructured and a new assistant principal for curriculum and quality, with experience of working in an outstanding college, has joined the senior management team. Governors and managers have been provided with training from external consultants to provide clarity about their respective roles and responsibilities.

Governors and staff have reviewed the college's mission and values, and a strategic plan for 2008/13 has been launched recently. Staff have been consulted fully over the development of the strategic objectives and understand their roles in achieving them. The objectives are focused well on improving the quality of the provision and ensuring that the college is able to meet the needs of the community. Collaborative working with the local authority and schools has improved and the college is a key partner in the development of 14 to 19 provision.

The management structure implemented in September 2007 has improved communications, team working and the sharing of good practice. Key policies and procedures for curriculum and quality have been reviewed and enhanced. Managers have been provided with useful training to ensure that they are implemented consistently. Staff are much better informed about and supported in addressing the issues the college faces.

A key priority for 2008/09 is to improve the financial position of the college, to secure its ability to achieve its long term aims. Work is underway to ensure that resources are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

At the previous inspection, quality improvement mechanisms were inconsistently applied across the college. What progress has there been in addressing this and is there evidence of impact?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in developing its quality improvement arrangements and ensuring they are applied consistently across the college. The self-assessment process is now more rigorous. All staff are

involved in judging the quality of their provision. They now record their judgements and evidence throughout the year using an online proforma that has been effective in simplifying procedures. The validation of self-assessment is much more challenging than it was previously.

Managers and staff now place more emphasis on learners' views and use them more effectively to bring about improvements. Students provided several examples of where the college had listened to their views and responded effectively by making changes and improvements. Students now have more opportunities to make their views known to the college. Methods used include: surveys measured against national benchmark responses; meetings with student representatives; an electronic facility for them to make comments; and direct contact with staff during tutorials. However, the college does not provide students with sufficient feedback on actions taken in response to issues raised in surveys.

The use of data to monitor and improve the quality of provision has improved and staff have been trained in the interpretation and use of management information. The new college structure and more effective communication channels, including the use of the staff intranet, are providing good frameworks for sharing good practice and the promotion of a more consistent application of quality improvement systems.

What action has been taken to ensure that data is used effectively to monitor and improve performance?	Reasonable progress
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Reasonable progress has been made in ensuring that data is used effectively to monitor and improve performance. Investment in database management systems, electronic registers and staff training has given managers and staff the information and skills they need to better manage their provision. Students at risk of falling behind or leaving their courses early are now clearly identified and appropriate action is taken. Staff are responsible for managing and analysing their own data, which are now scrutinised carefully and checked for accuracy. A variety of useful and informative reports are available and used for purposes such as governors' analysis of performance, and evidence to support self-assessment. The college is now able to produce reports comparing year-on-year data to monitor and analyse trends over time.