

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Dearne Valley College

Date of visit: 28 January 2009

Context

Dearne Valley College is a medium sized general further education college serving the former coalfield communities of south east Barnsley, south west Doncaster and north Rotherham. Students come to the college from all three boroughs. The college has grown significantly over the last ten years and now has approximately 1,400 full-time and 2,500 part-time students. Its main provision is vocational training, with progression routes from pre-entry to level 5 in several curriculum areas. It provides apprenticeship and Train to Gain programmes in response to local employer needs. The college has a growing provision for learners aged 14 to 16 including three Young Apprenticeship programmes and is working with all three boroughs and the Dearne Valley Education Partnership to develop the 14 to 19 diplomas.

Currently, 85% of full-time students are aged 16 to 18. Approximately half of the full-time students are female. Nearly all students are of white origin. High levels of educational and social disadvantage and ongoing regeneration exist in the area. Unemployment has fallen, although it is still above national rates. The number of young people who leave school with five or more high grade passes at GCSE is well below the national average.

Note: National success rates referred to in this report and in the college's self-assessment report use a 3% increase in success rates for 2007/08 when compared with the national rates in 2006/07 for comparative purposes.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made to improve success rates for adult students on long level 1 and 3 programmes?	Reasonable progress
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The success rates for adult students taking long level 1 and level 3 courses have improved in 2007/08. Level 1 success rates improved by around 16% in 2007/08 when compared with the previous year. Level 3 success rates improved by around 2% over the same period. Both success rates are now broadly in line with national rates.

Long level course success rates have improved overall in the college over the last three years at a faster rate than the national rate of improvement. Rising from 3% below to 3% above the national rate over this period. Success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 at all levels and for adults at level 2 are now around four percentage points above the national rates. However, overall success rates are below the national rates for adults taking GCSE and Train to Gain courses, for those taking level 3 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) courses and for students taking GCE A-levels. The college's improved overall success rate and the areas for improvement identified here were all broadly recognised in the college's self-assessment report.

Retention rates are broadly in line with or above national rates except for adult students at level 3 where retention is significantly below the national rate.

What progress has been made to improve success rates for students on apprenticeship and Train to Gain programmes?	Reasonable progress
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Apprenticeship success rates at level 2 have improved particularly well in 2007/08 when compared with the very poor success rates for the previous two years. Overall success rates are now around 6% above the national rate. Timely success rates have improved at a similar rate over the same period. Train to Gain overall success rates have not improved in 2007/08 and are around 5% below the national rate.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in the implementation of planned improvements in information, advice and guidance arrangements and the promotion of progression opportunities?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection and monitoring visits, the college has maintained a full-time information, advice and guidance officer to support the dissemination of progression information to students. It has increased its focus on the development of students' study skills to better prepare them for progression to higher levels. More information is provided to potential students and parents prior to starting on a course. Potential students can participate in taster sessions and summer schools. They all have a personal interview prior to enrolment and trade specific occupational assessments are used in construction to better match courses with student aspirations. Initial assessment of students' additional support needs is now more systematic and pre-course planning now carefully accounts for all student support needs. The college has also improved its range of level 3 progression opportunities for students.

The college has made clear improvements in the systems it uses to capture and evaluate student progression and destination information. The college is also aware

that these systems are in their early stages of development and that further work is required to capture and fully evaluate student progression and destinations to better inform planning and monitor trends over time.

What progress has been made in the implementation of planned improvements in teaching and learning and in raising the standards of students work since the previous inspection?	Significant progress
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The college judges the standard of students' work to be good and this is reflected in the increasing success rates for both age groups. It is also seen in the improving profiles of student grades, for example students achieving merits and distinctions for units as opposed to passes. One of the major factors supporting the improving standards is the increasing use of information learning technology. For example, students now routinely video their work and this is used for assessment and to support target-setting. The new virtual learning environment introduced in September 2008, is now supporting many aspects of students' development and is having a positive impact on the standard of their work.

'Learning Sets' involve groups of staff working on specific developments. The Sets have helped improve teaching and learning overall and had a beneficial impact on standards of work. For example, one group worked on improving classroom management and meeting differing student needs more effectively. Aim Higher funding has been used to help motivate and inspire students so they can see the benefits of working harder to produce better work and achieve higher grades.

What progress has been made in the implementation of planned improvements to engage employers and better meet the needs of students?	Significant progress
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Applications to the college and conversions from initial application to starting on a course have increased. Success rates have improved significantly at most levels, including apprenticeship success rates. The results of a recent student survey about induction and pre-enrolment showed that the college was in the top 25% when compared nationally and to the local area. The college has an effective student involvement strategy. Students are involved in a wide range of activities to ensure the college is responsive to their needs, including attending team meetings and undertaking lesson observations. Enrichment activities are tailored to meet students' and employers' needs.

The college has developed highly productive relationships with employers and has recently achieved the training quality standard. Provision is very responsive to local priorities and individual needs, for example staff attending work places at night to support shift workers, and level 3 provision being provided following a request from a local museum. Apprenticeship and Train to Gain programmes are growing and

linked well to the demands of the local area. The college uses a wide range of activities to quality assure arrangements in this area, such as mystery shoppers. It makes good use of information to keep up to date with local needs and uses feedback to support curriculum development.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made to improve participation rates for those not in employment, education or training (NEET) since the previous monitoring visit?	Significant progress
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The NEET programme has developed very well over the last 18 months. The main part of the programme is the 12 week 'Raising Aspirations for Tomorrow' (RAFT) programme, where students are introduced to a variety of units and can achieve accreditation in them. There were three cohorts in 2008 and a fourth cohort has started the programme in 2009. Students can then progress on to mainstream provision or to the certificate in vocational studies, which has been introduced as a progression route for those not yet ready for other courses. In liaison with local authorities a four-to-six week 'RAFT in the community' programme has been developed which supports young people back into learning and feeds, along with another programme funded through the European Social Fund (ESF), into the full RAFT programme where appropriate.

Progression data show that all of these programmes have high progression rates and support young people back into employment, education and training. For example all of those students on the certificate in vocational studies had progressed from RAFT courses. Of the 13 enrolments on the RAFT in the community programme, nine progressed on to the full RAFT programme and one got a job.

What progress has been made to maintain the college's capacity to improve?	Significant progress
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Since the previous inspection the college has further developed its capacity to improve. A new 'standards team' is established to better co-ordinate improvements in teaching and learning and staff development activities. The Principal and other senior managers have developed networks with another eight colleges to support and share the development of new methods and practices. Tutorial assistants are established across the college and play an important role in monitoring students' progress. The college has improved success rates in most areas.

The college has developed its own management information system called 'TRACE'. The data produced through TRACE is accurate and used well to inform self-assessment. The arrangements to validate the college's self-assessment reports are more rigorous and fully involve the college governors. The college has introduced a

series of themed internal inspections that run parallel to the normal cycle of internal review and inspection. These new arrangements allow the college to better focus on specific areas of concern for improvement and action planning purposes. The college has recognised that it needs to develop more systematic arrangements to monitor and evaluate the performance of different types of student. Current arrangements do not provide sufficient analysis to fully inform self-assessment or improvement planning.