

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Kent Adult Education Service
Date of visit: 22 January 2009

Context

Kent Adult Education Service (KAES) is a local authority provider based within the Kent County Council's (KCC) Communities Directorate. KAES provides learning for adults and families to meet their needs for skills, personal development and enjoyment. The service works collaboratively with a range of public, private and third sector partners' delivering skills and training to raise aspirations and contribute to economic success. In 2007/08, the service delivered 3184 courses with 39595 enrolments and 29058 learners across 15 sector subject areas including courses for family learning. Of the learners, 32% attended accredited (FE) courses and 68% attended non-accredited (PCDL) courses.

At the previous inspection, in May 2005, provision was good in business administration, management and professional, information and communications technology (ICT), health, social care and public services, and visual and performing arts and media. It was satisfactory in construction, hospitality, sport, leisure and travel, humanities, and family learning. Provision in English, languages and communications, and foundation programmes was inadequate. Leadership and management and equality of opportunity were satisfactory, while quality improvement was inadequate. At the reinspection, in October 2006, the two inadequate areas of learning were judged satisfactory. KAES had also made significant progress in dealing with all the major weaknesses identified in quality improvement, and its quality improvement arrangements were good.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made with improving success rates since the previous inspection, and particularly in 2007/08?	Reasonable progress
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Learners success rates overall have improved since the previous inspection. For accredited (FE) courses, overall success rates, for all lengths of course, have consistently and markedly improved since the previous inspection. They increased from 55% in 2005/06 to 68% in 2007/08, with most outcomes known for 2007/08. For the largest group of learners, on long courses, success rates have also consistently improved, from 41% in 2005/06 to 60% in 2007/08. The latter is modest, however, and has improved by only one percentage point since 2006/07. Success rates on short courses have improved over the last three years and are at 74% in 2007/08. They are high for very short courses and rose from 82% in 2006/07

to 93% in 2007/08. Learners' retention overall improved markedly in 2007/08, to 86%. It is often high, especially on shorter courses.

In foundation studies, the largest area for accredited provision, the success rate fell from 66% in 2005/06 to 56% in 2006/07 because of low retention. In 2007/08, however, with a significantly increased number of learners, the success rate improved to 69%. The service had identified and remedied problems with course structure and delivery.

Service data for the larger number of non-accredited enrolments indicate high overall retention and pass rates over the three years 2004/05 to 2006/07. Overall success rates, for all courses, have stayed much the same over those three years, with a 90% rate in 2006/07. On long courses, success rates have improved well between 2004/05 and 2006/07, from 77% to 84%, although they fell back to 68% in 2005/06. Success rates for the arts and media and for languages, two of the largest areas of provision, have consistently improved. The self-assessment report recognises that there are inconsistencies in the thoroughness and application of arrangements for recognising and recording learners' progress and achievement (RARPA) across the service.

Since the previous inspection, the service has worked well to improve internal progression opportunities for learners. The curriculum is now planned to facilitate progression. There are some good examples of progression for ESOL and language learners.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made in improving the quality of teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress
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The main vehicles for this progress and improvement have been the introduction of more thorough and systematic observation of teaching, improved support and professional development, better recruitment of teachers, and a greater willingness to dispense with the services of under-performing teachers.

Managers and teachers have become more critical when determining the standards of teaching and learning. Specialist consultants in each subject area have helped them in this, and have trained a further 38 manager/teachers as observers. All teachers were observed at least once between September 2007 and December 2008. Teachers whose lessons are graded consistently no better than satisfactory are supported by senior colleagues to improve. Around 20% of teachers last year were newly appointed. They were all observed at least twice and given advice on how to improve. Managers set up professional development courses to address commonly identified teaching weaknesses. Experienced and confident practitioners run courses for their colleagues. Around 150 teachers are currently studying for qualifications; mainly the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS) or the Preparatory qualification (PTLLS).

Recruitment of teachers is now more thorough. KAES often offers experienced teachers the opportunity to teach on courses when a colleague has left, rather than recruiting a new teacher. Probationary staff are closely monitored and supported. If they fail to meet the standard required by the end of their probation, their employment is not confirmed.

Managers and observers of teaching realise that the standard of what constitutes “satisfactory” or “good” is continually rising. They are more thorough in their grading and the overall grade profile of teaching and learning has changed little since the previous inspection.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made in improving the understanding of staff in relation to inclusion and equality of opportunity?	Significant progress
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While equality of opportunity was judged to be satisfactory at the previous inspection, there was insufficient training for staff. As part of a well-planned and executed strategy to improve the promotion of equality and diversity, staff are now thoroughly and well trained. With a supportive, but challenging infrastructure of policies and procedures, the service has set about the task of significantly raising the profile of equality and diversity. This is very much an essential element of the overall service strategy to improve performance, through the identification and meeting of learners’ needs.

Staff development is a fundamental and continuing element of the plan to improve the promotion of equality and diversity. ‘Generic’ training provides an appropriate level of awareness, complementing a range of specifically focused sessions on particular aspects of equality and diversity. Teachers’ understanding is also significantly aided through their working towards teaching qualifications, where the input on aspects of equality and diversity is significant.

The training is often accompanied by very useful practical materials. The ‘Tutors Top Tips’ booklet contains some very valuable strategies for introducing aspects of equality and diversity in teaching. Teachers are well trained in aspects of safeguarding, especially for vulnerable adults. The service has produced a very useful card for tutors (Adult and child protection-essential information for tutors) which addresses simply and succinctly ‘what happens if.....?’

Subject self-assessment reports increasingly identify aspects of provision which have been improved, and those for improvement, which are derived from debate and discussion around the themes of equality and diversity. The under-performance of particular groups, or the lack of involvement of particular groups, are increasingly common topics of team debate.

What is the extent of progress in the effective use of accurate and reliable data to monitor and improve performance?	Significant progress
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Improving the management and use of data has received considerable attention since the previous inspection, when management data was inaccurate. Kent AES invested substantially in a new management information system. Data is now more accurate, more readily available to managers, more useful and better used. Data reports are more timely.

Managers now understand how data analysis can help them improve their provision. For example, they reviewed retention rates at the end of the academic year 2006/07. They found that retention for accredited courses overall was unacceptably low, particularly on longer courses. One in four learners dropped out of courses in 2006/07. Managers reviewed the curriculum offer, stopped offering some courses, shortened others, and introduced a process for teachers to communicate with learners who missed two consecutive lessons. In 2007/08, retention rates improved to 86%, with only one learner in seven dropping out of courses.

Communication between management information specialists and programme lead managers is much improved. Managers now know what type of information is potentially available and can request reports designed specifically to suit their needs. Managers have acted effectively on the results of data analysis to initiate improvement. For example, concerned at the low achievement rate on some book-keeping courses in 2007, a manager narrowed the problem down to two modules of the course, both involving the use of computers. To help the teachers to improve their teaching of this part of the course, he brought in a more experienced teacher to help them. In 2008, the achievement rate on book-keeping courses rose sharply.

How much progress has been made with using self-assessment and development planning as an aid to improvement?	Reasonable progress
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Self-assessment is increasingly thorough. Inspectors found the latest self-assessment report very useful in their work for this monitoring visit.

Self-assessment is detailed and largely comprehensive. It provides a sound basis for improvement. In the area of independent living skills, for instance, KAES has overhauled all aspects of the provision since the previous inspection. The staff team is new, and more effective, and the curriculum has changed in response to learners' needs and requests.

In some areas, however, weaknesses have remained stubbornly intractable. For example, managers found that a high proportion of learners studying Spanish for beginners dropped out. Despite implementing improvements, the retention rate did not improve the following year. Further changes are currently under consideration. Despite improvements in self-assessment and in improvement planning, and in all of the areas considered as part of the monitoring visit, the self-assessed grades in

nearly every subject area are very similar to those reported by inspectors in 2005 and 2006.

The process for conducting self-assessment is reviewed annually and is continually improving. The quality manual is clear, and accessible to staff. Managers have introduced bench-marking, so that, for instance, for a subject area to be considered good, at least two-thirds of lessons observed must be good. Managers across all subject areas validate their judgements against those of colleagues. In the latest self-assessment round, the validation process resulted in changes to self-assessment grades.

Staff are now more aware of self-assessment. They are clearer about what is required of them. Managers have focused on ICT as a key medium for communication with teachers. They have assessed the effectiveness of this, and have found that a very high percentage of teachers favour this means of communication. Teachers increasingly share good practice through the KAES intranet/virtual learning environment, which is accessible to all of them.

Managers liaise with other major providers of adult and community learning in Sussex, Surrey and Medway to review each others' self-assessment process and to share good practice. Through this peer review group, known as SEQUIN (South East Quality Improvement Network), KAES managers introduced a very effective way of graphically displaying the strengths and weaknesses for each subject area.