

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Lowestoft College

Date of visit: 19 May 2009

Context

Lowestoft College (the college) is a medium-sized general further education (FE) college serving the district of Waveney in northeast Suffolk. All three high schools in Lowestoft currently have sixth forms but from 2011 these will be replaced with a sixth form college, to be co-located with the FE college. The college works with four rural high schools in Waveney to deliver pre-16 vocational education at the North Suffolk Skills Centre in the market town of Halesworth. The proportion of adults qualified to level 2 is much lower in Waveney than in Suffolk and nationally as is the proportion of school leavers with five or more GCSEs at A* - C including English and mathematics.

The college specialises in vocational education and training. The largest areas of provision include health and public services, engineering, construction, retailing and commercial enterprise, and preparation for life and work. Work-based learning is offered in engineering, construction, hairdressing, hospitality and catering, and business and administration. Vocational courses are provided for increasing numbers of 14-16 year olds from local schools. The college leads a Train to Gain consortium which has five partner organisations. Higher Education (HE) courses provided at the college form part of University Campus Suffolk.

The college has developed a wide range of commercial and certificated courses for industry with specialist provision in offshore, energy and construction and in the care sector. The college's Maritime Centre attracts an increasing number of international learners.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made with improving success rates since the last monitoring visit?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates on long courses have continued to improve at a rate which is higher than that observed nationally. The overall success rate of 73% in 2007/08 represents an improvement of 11% over three years, yet it is still slightly below the national average.

Long course success rates for learners aged 16-18 have improved at a satisfactory rate and are now at the national average. Improvements have been broadly consistent between courses at different levels, although at level 3, retention has improved whilst pass rates have remained stable. The information available on learners' progress in relation to their starting points indicates that they make the progress that is expected of them.

Long course success rates for learners aged over 19 are much more variable. At level 1, success rates have improved by 30% during the past three years. The success rate at level 2 has also improved during this period, although not as dramatically. However, the success rate at level 3 has declined by 7% owing to low retention on these courses. The college has analysed carefully the causes of this decline and is confident that current learners will demonstrate much improved retention. In-year retention data certainly indicates an improved picture for 2008/09.

The college rightly attaches great importance to the development of learners' key skills as so many learners enter the college with comparatively low level skills in literacy and numeracy for their age. Key skills results have shown consistent improvement and are now good. Work-based learning successes are also good with well-above average numbers of trainees completing their frameworks within the agreed time.

Quality of provision

How successful have the college's initiatives to improve teaching and learning been?	Significant progress
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The college's lesson observation procedures are rigorous and comprehensive. The number of trained observers has been increased, and comments on lesson observation forms and action plans demonstrate their good awareness of the aspects of lessons which make learning good. The identification of strengths and areas for improvement in individual lessons is a recent successful improvement. Features of lessons are entered onto a database to enable the rapid identification of areas where improvement is needed as well as providing a useful source of information for those who wish to share the good practice of colleagues in a particular aspect of teaching and learning.

The development of information learning technology has been rapid and successful. Some 52 'SharePoint' sites are currently active, providing teachers and learners with access to a broad range of course specific materials. The development of 'mobile learning' is another interesting new feature which the college intends to expand.

The college's sharply focused staff development has underpinned improvements in teaching. The proportion of good and better lessons has increased and the grades

awarded to individual teachers have improved, with the teachers who have participated in the most staff development activities making the most rapid strides.

How much progress has been made in developing the quality and effectiveness of target setting and individual learning plans?	Reasonable progress
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Teachers review regularly the progress that learners make by monitoring their progress against the targets contained in their individual learning plans. Targets contained in the individual learning plans are mostly good, although there is some variability in quality between curriculum areas. Many learners on accredited courses have targets which are clear, contain times for completion and relate appropriately to the achievement of their qualification. However, sometimes these targets are too broad to enable learners to be clear about the specific actions they need to take if they wish to make progress, or which actions they need to give priority to. Some learners have a number of such broad targets with an identical completion date. Learners' personal targets and their acquisition of skills which support learning are recorded satisfactorily in tutorials. However, teachers do not always record targets to rectify some of their concerns, for example, poor behaviour.

The college has much improved, but not yet complete, information about learners' prior attainment. It is piloting a system to negotiate targets with level 3 learners to help them understand how to improve their performance. This new system has already been successful in encouraging some learners to achieve more challenging outcomes.

How is the college incorporating the learner voice into its quality assurance procedures?	Reasonable progress
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The college has a published 'learner involvement strategy' which is related clearly to its values and mission. There is a straightforward structure for incorporating the views of learners into the college's quality assurance and learners generally feel well-represented. Learners' experiences of college life are analysed carefully, although not always through the same processes, an aspect which the college is keen to develop through the use of its virtual learning environment. The learner conference has proved a valuable addition to the procedures for gathering learners' views and the student newsletter, now produced by learners themselves, is a valuable source of feedback.

Leadership and management

How effectively are managers at all levels within the organisation provided with management information?	Significant progress
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The college has developed still further the good data capture system identified at the previous monitoring visit. This management information system is based on a secure operating framework, draws together information from a wide range of sources and presents it in a very accessible form for staff. All staff have access to the system and can make additions and amendments to it online, helping to ensure that the data are up-to-date and accurate. Teachers make very good and frequent use of the system to monitor the performance of their courses and the progress of individual learners. The management information system staff communicate with and support teachers very well, including providing excellent training packages for staff who wish to make better use of the system.