

Harlow College

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Harlow College is a tertiary college situated in Harlow town centre. The college is the main provider of post-16 education with only one school in Harlow having a sixth form. Harlow was designed as a new town in 1947 for 60,000 people. It now has a population of 80,000 and is due for major growth. Harlow contains some areas of deprivation, a history of low aspirations and participation in learning, a poor health record and low skills base. The economic downturn is impacting seriously on Harlow with unemployment above the regional and county average at 5.7%. The proportion of young people gaining five A*-C passes at GCSE including English and mathematics is below average at 38.5%. The college is on a single site and offers courses in most sector subject areas over a wide range of levels. Most learners are from Essex and Hertfordshire and are of white ethnic origin.

The previous inspection judged that the college's overall effectiveness was satisfactory as were achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management. Capacity to improve was judged to be good. The college experienced a period of significant staff changes and turbulence after the inspection. Three monitoring visits were carried out in the period between September 2007 and November 2008. The outcomes of these visits demonstrated a gradual improvement to the college's position. In November 2008, the college was judged to have made significant progress in improving outcomes for learners studying vocational courses and reasonable progress in other areas. However, insufficient progress had been made in improving outcomes for learners studying GCE A levels and AS levels.

The college provides courses in 14 of the 15 subject areas (SSAs). In 2008/09, the largest proportion of learners aged 16-18 were studying level 3 courses. For adults, although the largest proportion was studying level 3 courses, the other two levels were closer in number. For learners aged 16-18, the most popular areas of study are arts, media and publishing, retail and commercial enterprise and engineering and manufacturing technologies. For adults, they are health, public services and care, construction and preparation for life and work. Whilst more females than males aged 16-18 study at the college, the position is reversed for adult learners.

An important part of the college's strategy in 2008/09 was to build and substantially increase the range and extent of the college's services directly and through the APEX consortium managed by the college. The college was successful in recruiting 16-18 year old learners and also recruited successfully for apprenticeships in this age for 2009/10. However, apprenticeship targets for 2008/09 were not met. Enrolments for GCE A levels and AS levels declined again in 2008/09 with 150 AS level learners joining the college compared to 626 National Diploma learners.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has Harlow College made in securing accurate and useful self-assessment and effective quality improvement strategies? Reasonable progress

The previous visit noted the stringent quality procedures including unannounced audit days and close monitoring of underperforming courses. These procedures are now further embedded and enjoy the confidence and support of those college staff interviewed. The introduction of clusters of courses chosen for their complementary skills and areas for improvement has resulted in effective sharing of good practice and improved provision.

Middle managers are using self assessment particularly well. The process is a valuable tool in improving provision. The quality audits focus helpfully on the learners' experience as a whole and not just on success rates. Managers use observation of teaching and learning grades and action plans as a contributory aspect of self-assessment. There is greater ownership of findings and managers perceive self-assessment as a major quality improvement driver.

The early draft curriculum self assessment reports (SARs) are particularly self-critical and grade areas on a wide variety of aspects rather than relying solely on success rates. Learner and employer feedback is used widely and taken into account when arriving at the overall grade. Data is particularly detailed and accurate and used well to support judgments.

Governors are well informed and involved actively in the self-assessment process. Information and data given to the corporation is very clear and detailed providing them with an accurate view of the college's progress and allowing them to support and challenge the college appropriately.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has Harlow College made in sustaining the improvements and maintaining the standards for learners studying vocational qualifications? Significant progress

The previous visit noted the significant progress made to success rates for learners studying vocational qualifications. College data show standards have been maintained in 2008/09 and indeed, in many cases improved further. For learners aged 16-18, marked improvements have been secured at all levels for vocational qualifications. In particular, level 1 success rates have risen to 90% compared with

the 2007/08 average of 88%. At level 2, success rates have risen to 88%, well above average. Level 3 vocational success rates have risen to 85%.

In 2008/09, adult learners achieved success rates well above the 2007/08 national averages at all levels. The large number of adult learners studying level 2 courses maintained their 79% success rate. At level 3, the 86% success rate was well above the 2007/08 average of 72%. Level 1 success rates declined slightly to 83% but again, remain well above the 2007/08 average of 76%.

Value added data for 2008/09 show learners making significantly better progress in vocational qualifications than would be predicted from their prior attainment. Key skills results for 2008/09 have improved to 93%. Current attendance and retention rates are high with an average attendance of 93% on vocational courses.

What progress has Harlow College made in improving outcomes and provision for learners studying GCE A level and AS levels? Reasonable progress

At the time of the previous visit, the college was judged to have made insufficient progress in improving provision and outcomes for learners studying GCE A levels and AS levels. The college has focused relentlessly on improving this provision. New partnership arrangements with local schools have been initiated, although they are at an early stage. Success rates for AS levels remain below the high sixth form college (SFC) average; but the sharp contrast between subjects has been reduced. Those subjects, including law and accounts, where success rates were persistently below average have been removed from the college's portfolio. Overall value-added outcomes in 2008/09 were positive having been negative for a number of years. High grades remain below the SFC average but have improved from 14% to 22%.

Success rates for GCE A levels have improved to broadly the SFC average and the proportion of young people progressing to higher education has improved to 44%. Within this, there remain some subjects requiring further improvement such as English literature; however, English language and language and literature achieved success rates close to the SFC average.

The college has taken effective action, including an extended induction and a three week pre-GCE A level course, to improve attendance, success and retention. Currently, attendance is high at 95% and retention is close to 100%. The number of courses causing concern has been greatly reduced and closer working with parents and carers has been established in order to provide effective support for learners, particularly those at risk of not completing their courses successfully. Most learners on GCE A level and AS level courses interviewed were very positive about their experiences. They reported that they were well supported in their studies by teachers and support staff and that the college provided a safe and welcoming environment.

What progress has Harlow College made in securing good outcomes for work-based learners?

Reasonable progress

At the previous monitoring visit, the college had made reasonable progress towards securing consistently good outcomes for work based learners, although some subject areas were not performing well. The College's apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship success rates continue to vary. Advanced apprentices, with a success rate of 72.5%, were achieving better than apprentices. Timely success rates for both advanced apprentices and apprentices are low, but improving in most subject sector areas. In 2009/10, success rates have improved significantly with 92% for advanced apprentices and 83% for apprentices

Train to Gain success rates in 2008/09 were high at 91%, however this is a slight decrease from the 2007/08 rate of 95%. There has been a significant increase in learner numbers during this period from 126 in 2007/08 to 630 in 2008/09.

Harlow College, as part of the APEX consortium, has a central role in quality assuring the training of the APEX membership. The advanced apprenticeship and apprenticeship success rates portray a mixed picture with a few providers performing particularly well and others with consistently poor outcomes in some subject areas. Train to Gain success rates with 1,857 learners, are much better and have been consistently high for the past two years. In 2008/09 the overall success rates were 90%, and timely success rates have improved from 38% in 2006/07 to 68% in 2008/09.

The quality assurance procedures and stringent quality improvement measures developed by the college are comprehensive and are applied effectively to APEX members. As a result of these procedures, two providers received notices to improve and were subsequently withdrawn from the consortium due to insufficient improvement.

Quality of provision

What progress has Harlow College made in securing adequately qualified and effective teaching staff?

Reasonable progress

The high percentage of unqualified staff was identified as a significant concern in previous monitoring visits. By the last visit in November 2008, the college had made reasonable progress towards reducing the number of unqualified staff. The percentage of unqualified staff has now reduced further from 9% in 2008 to 2% in 2009. Staff completing teaching and learning courses are having a positive impact on improving the quality of provision in college by sharing new ideas and good practice with colleagues. A strong emphasis on equality and diversity within teaching and learning has contributed to a greater understanding and use of differentiated

teaching and learning activities to better meet the needs of learners. All new staff receive a thorough induction into the college's policies and procedures including safeguarding arrangements and a rolling programme of safeguarding training is in place. Staff development and training activities continue to support tutors' skills development and improve teaching and learning.

What progress has the college made in refining lesson observation to provide accurate information, robust links with staff training and effective sharing of good practice? Reasonable progress

The previous visit noted the reasonable progress the college had made in this area with improvements to lesson observation documentation, the recording of training needs and moderation process. These improvements have been maintained and improved further to provide clear information on observation outcomes and identified training needs.

The proportion of teaching judged by the college to be good or better has risen from 54% to 62% and no teaching and learning is judged to be inadequate. The proportion of teaching awarded the highest grade has also risen to 14% and those teachers are now identified clearly to lead and disseminate good practice across the curriculum. All teaching staff are observed in an unannounced visit and staff interviewed remain positive about the benefits of observation and the detailed feedback they receive. Informal and peer observation is also well-established and welcomed by staff.

Written observations are moderated carefully and those examined supported the grade awarded. Joint observations between inspectors and college managers resulted in well-aligned findings. The identification of training needs has been improved and individual and whole college training has been designed and delivered around those identified needs. The impact of training has been monitored carefully. Areas that have improved include planning, target setting, assessment and classroom management. Although work has begun on identifying the most able learners, it is at an early stage and observations take insufficient account of meeting the needs of very able learners.

What progress has the college made in improving the effectiveness of daily target setting in lessons? Reasonable progress

The college requires that all lessons have daily targets that learners must achieve before the end of the session. At the previous visit, learners were becoming more positive about the practice of daily target setting, although some still expressed doubts as to their usefulness. Learners interviewed at this visit perceived daily targets as contributing effectively to their progress, particularly with regard to extension targets for those achieving early.

The setting of daily targets for each lesson is well-established and the quality of written targets has improved, although some remain too general. More individualised targets are being set for learners. In the sixth form, the use of individual learning plans links effectively to daily targets set by the learners themselves. All teachers use the daily targets to help focus learners on what must be achieved in a particular lesson. More personalised targets are often devised to help overcome particular barriers to learning such as a specific learning need or a consistent difficulty. In practical lessons, targets are used particularly well with close links to the tasks and effective monitoring of learners' progress.

What progress has the college made in establishing productive links with employers and overseeing work-related activities effectively? Reasonable progress

At the previous monitoring visit, the Employer Responsiveness Unit (ERU) had been newly established, but was beginning to have an impact in developing strong links with employers and providing a range of training options for them. The college has reorganised its work-related learning activities and created an academy, giving this area prominence within the college and making it more accessible to learners. Links with employers have been maintained to a satisfactory level through the ERU within the academy and through the APEX consortium, despite the poor economic climate. A new management structure has enabled a more coherent approach to overseeing the wide range of work-related activity within the college.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in responding positively to learners concerns and comments? Reasonable progress

At previous visits, learners, particularly on GCE A level and AS level courses, voiced concerns about the quality of provision and the disruption to their studies. Those learners interviewed at this visit were more positive and the vast majority spoke warmly about their teaching, support and the general atmosphere of the college. All learners interviewed reported they felt the college was a safe and welcoming place.

The newly elected learner representatives were clear on how they communicated with college managers and gave examples of how their views had been acted upon. For example, information technology resources have been improved and recycling bins have been provided. A number of other improvements have been made to college processes and activities in response to learner feedback. These have included increasing the lunch period to an hour for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, after it had previously been reduced to 45 minutes. Learners on courses for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) requested a study room to complete their work and this was arranged.

Meetings of the Learner Council are attended by the principal and a governor with the outcomes circulated via the college's virtual learning environment. Learner representatives interviewed were confident that their voice and concerns were listened to and acted upon, including course organisation and teaching. Some concerns were raised about what was seen to be the inflexible lateness policy, particularly for adult learners with caring responsibilities. College managers are actively considering ways in which this might be improved.

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