

# West Kent College

Focused monitoring visit report

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## FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

### Context and focus of visit

West Kent College is a medium-sized general further education college, mainly located in the town of Tonbridge, with a construction, motor vehicle and engineering training centre located in nearby Tunbridge Wells. In 2008/09, the college had 3,812 learners aged 16 to 18 on long courses and 3,153 adults. Just over 90% of students are White British. Courses are offered in all areas of learning other than agriculture, horticulture and animal care. The largest areas of learning are preparation for life and work followed by health, public services and care. The college has a significant higher education portfolio and extensive Train to Gain contract. In 2008/09, 320 learners aged 14 to 16 attended the college to undertake vocational training.

The previous inspection was carried out in 2006. The college's overall effectiveness was judged to be good, as were its capacity to improve, leadership and management, and students' achievements. The quality of provision was satisfactory. Six subject areas were inspected in detail and three were evaluated to be good and three as satisfactory.

### Themes

#### Self-assessment and improvement planning

<p>What progress has been made by managers to improve quality improvement arrangements, planning and self-assessment?</p>	<p>Reasonable progress</p>
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Managers have reviewed and adjusted quality improvement arrangements. A range of activities aimed at improving provision has contributed to higher success rates on many courses. However, the college acknowledges the need for greater consistency in the use of quality assurance processes in order to raise standards across all aspects of its work. Central to the quality assurance cycle are the revamped lesson observation system, the work of advanced practitioners, mock inspections, five cross-college training days for all staff, detailed self-assessment reports and quality improvement plans. Increasingly, managers and teachers are using students' views and feedback to inform aspects of the college's work.

Quality assurance arrangements for employer responsive provision are thorough and effective. With a growing reliance on partner providers, the college has appropriate systems in place to vet, monitor and train staff from these other organisations. Work is underway to align, more closely, these quality assurance processes to the systems used for the mainstream curriculum. Work with employers has grown rapidly in the last few years and includes Skills for Life training, programmes for those who have been made redundant, training for offenders, and short courses. In addition, the college has apprenticeship programmes in nine vocational areas.

## Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made to raise outcomes for learners? Reasonable progress

Students' outcomes improved between 2007/08 and 2008/09, with success rates increasing by two percentage points and seven percentage points for students aged 16 to 18 and adults respectively. Success rates for students aged 16 to 18 on advanced courses, an area of concern at the last monitoring visit, increased by seven percentage points and are now close to the national average. They also increased for students aged 16 to 18 on foundation programmes, but fell at intermediate level for the second successive year and are now below the national average.

The overall success rate for adult learners rose by seven percentage points in 2008/09, with large increases for those on intermediate (six percentage points) and advanced courses (ten percentage points), taking them to above the national averages. They are comparable to national figures at foundation level. Success rates for short courses have decreased consistently for the past three years and they are comparable to the national average.

Students' outcomes for employer responsive provision have improved steadily. Timely success rates for work-based learners are comparable to national figures. Although Train to Gain success rates are slightly below national figures, these courses attract many hard-to-reach learners, for example ex-offenders. Outcomes for key skills in literacy, application of number, and information technology were poor in 2008/09.

## Quality of provision

How effective is the college's provision for local school pupils aged 14 to 16? Reasonable progress

Most of the local school pupils who attend the college one or two days a week complete their course, gain qualifications and then progress on to further education. Evaluations by pupils aged 14 to 16 indicate a high level of satisfaction with the college's provision. This year, the college has enrolled 162 pupils from 11 different schools, the majority of whom are studying on foundation programmes in hairdressing, hospitality and catering, construction and motor vehicle studies. In addition, there are 15 young apprentices on intermediate courses and 11 students on a diploma in construction and the built environment.

Pupils who have been excluded from school, or are at risk of exclusion, generally achieve well on the college's alternative curriculum programme. All of the 23 students in the current year undertake a vocational option, as well as enrichment activities and courses to develop their literacy, numeracy and information technology skills.

How effectively is information learning technology (ILT) used to promote learning? Significant progress

Students and staff are able to identify the positive impact of the college's focus on the further development of ILT. Students now expect to have access to schemes of work, lesson notes and relevant resources through the college's virtual learning environment (VLE) and, increasingly, tutors are providing them with different types of subject-specific materials online.

Teachers' expertise and confidence in the development and use of ILT varies, but teachers have learnt from each other and they benefit from an extensive and flexible range of training opportunities. In some vocational areas, such as sports and leisure, students use webcams to record evidence of their achievement. In hospitality, dance and plumbing, students and teachers make good use of video clips on the VLE of performances. The technology is used to encourage students to develop their reflective skills and to introduce, or reinforce, aspects of the curriculum.

Standard ILT facilities are not currently available in all classrooms, but the impending move to a new campus has provided an opportunity to equip the new buildings with up-to-date technology and to motivate teachers to use it more imaginatively to help their students to learn.

How well are value added measures used to monitor the progress of individual learners? Reasonable progress

Staff fully recognise the benefits of using value-added measures to monitor and stretch the performance of students. Analysis comparing the final results of students to their prior attainment shows the progress of A-level students is good and satisfactory for advanced vocational students.

Tutors set full-time students on advanced courses aspirational target grades that are calculated according to their GCSE results. Further targets to improve their work are also agreed at one-to-one meetings between tutors and students. Students value these meetings and the support they receive from staff. Students' targets are recorded on electronic individual learning plans (eILP). These eILPs are placed on the college's VLE with additional comments added by tutors on the work, attitude and behaviour of students. The facility for teachers and students to add comments as well is not being used currently.

Despite training for students and staff on how to produce clear, specific targets, the quality of many is inconsistent. The best targets are measurable, challenging and help students improve the standard of their work. Less effective targets are too general and do not specify what the student actually has to do in order to perform better.

## Leadership and management

What progress has the college made to address the recent decrease in success rates for preparation for life and work provision? Reasonable progress

Success rates for students on preparation for life and work courses fell in 2008/09 by four percentage points for 16 to 18 year-olds and six percentage points for adults, bringing them below the national average for similar colleges. Low success rates are found mainly in literacy and numeracy courses, and key skills. Staff vacancies in this curriculum area last year led to disruption to lessons and this is partly the reason for this dip in results. Also, students do not always enrol on the most appropriate course for their needs. Curriculum and senior managers are fully aware of these issues and a quality improvement plan is in place to tackle the weaknesses identified. This plan is reviewed regularly and amendments are made as appropriate. Staff training, with a focus on improving teaching and learning, is taking place. Current in-year retention rates for this provision are high at 95%.

Achievement rates are at least satisfactory for provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, courses in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and for young people not in employment, education or training.

How well has the college developed procedures to capture and act upon feedback from learners? Significant progress

The college has a strong commitment to collect and act upon learner feedback and has prioritised this work over the past 18 months, making considerable progress to develop procedures. Students provide feedback on their experience of the college in a large number of ways and they value the seriousness with which staff treat their concerns. Students hold focus group meetings, and meet directly with the senior management team, who have taken effective follow-up action. For example, the location of smoking areas in the college has been moved. Students have been involved also in the recruitment of staff, the design of the prospectus, and in planning new college buildings.

On the great majority of courses, students have elected student representatives who attend course team meetings. This enables the views of students to be incorporated into course reviews, although this does not take place for all courses, particularly for part-time evening courses. The views of learners are also not systematically taken into account when compiling subject self-assessment reports. The recent development of a student forum on the college's VLE provides an avenue for discussion of suggestions and complaints and is popular and used by a large number of students.

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