MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Preston College

Date of visit: 24 April 2008

Context

Preston College is a large general further education college serving the city of Preston and the surrounding area of central Lancashire. The college serve a population of approximately 250,000. The college has a main site (Fulwood Campus) in the north of the city, a nearby site for visual and performing arts provision, and over 60 learning centres throughout the locality.

The college provides courses in all areas of learning that are funded by the Learning and Skills Council, except land-based qualifications. In most of the sector subject areas, it is possible to progress from entry level to level 4. The college is a partner college of the University of Central Lancashire.

In 2006/07, 19,847 learners attended the college. Of this total, 21% of learners were on full-time programmes; 78% of learners were adult learners, 47% were men, and 18% were of minority ethnic origin. The average number of work-based learners in training was 244 and the average on Train to Gain programmes was 1,500.

Preston College was last inspected in November 2007. Effectiveness of provision, achievement and standards and leadership and management were satisfactory. Capacity to improve, quality of provision and equality of opportunity were good. In sector subject areas, the college was awarded three good grades, four satisfactory grades and one unsatisfactory grade. The unsatisfactory grade was in engineering and manufacturing technologies.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made in improving retention rates, particularly at level 3?	Reasonable

The college had implemented strategies to improve retention prior to the last full inspection in November 2007 but it was too early to judge their impact. College data for early April 2008 shows improved retention against the same period last year in 13 out of 15 sector subject areas. Increases in retention rates range from 1% to 14%, with a college overall improvement of 3%. The monitoring of attendance has been

improved through the full implementation of electronic registers across all age groups, improved use of the college's student performance and monitoring reporting system, and monthly reporting of attendance and retention to the curriculum quality group. A range of incentives and awards have been introduced to improve attendance. Learners' views have been used to identify aspects that could lead to improved retention. Actions taken as a result include reductions in the length of some courses and restructured course timetables to better meet learners' needs. Procedures to advise and guide learners intending to progress to higher level qualifications have been reviewed and revised. The college is focused on further improving teaching and learning, and in particular the use of differentiation and personalisation, which is recognised by the college as a fundamental aspect of improving retention. It is too early to judge the impact of improvements in retention on overall success rates. Key skills had a revised timetable structure piloted in September 2007. Those courses taking part in the pilot show a significant improvement in both retention and success rates across all key skills. The exception to this is in application of number level 2 where improvements in success rates are more modest.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving work-based learning?	Reasonable

The college is taking appropriate action to ensure the organisational restructuring of work-based learning implemented prior to the last full college inspection becomes embedded. Work-based learning is more fully integrated with cross-college services such as information, advice and guidance and college wide systems such as student performance and monitoring. Monthly meetings are being used effectively to monitor work-based learning programme performance and enable sharing of good practice across teams. Administrative processes and procedures have been reviewed and revised where necessary and staff trained in their use. The post inspection action plan clearly details key objectives, actions to be taken, timescales and staff responsibility but is insufficiently specific in the measures of some success criteria. Improving teaching and learning has a high profile through staff development and dual and peer observations. Resources are being developed for the virtual learning environment to support work based learners. College data indicates improved retention on apprenticeship programmes and improvements in overall and timely success rates.

What actions have been taken to improve the inadequate provision in engineering?	Reasonable

The new technology management team, introduced shortly before the last full inspection in November 2007, is working hard to improve the provision. Attendance is being more closely monitored. A retention group meets monthly to review the

effectiveness of the strategies being used to improve retention and student progress. Actions taken to improve attendance and retention include better targeting and support for at-risk students, more involvement of parents or guardians where appropriate, and rewards for good attendance. A staff skills audit had been completed and used to identify professional development needs and deploy lecturing staff more effectively. All staff now have personal targets for the retention and achievement of their students which are regularly reviewed. College data shows significant improvements in retention on comparable data for last year. However it is too early to judge to overall impact on success rates.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the governors systematic monitoring of academic achievement?	Reasonable

Several actions have been taken to increase the involvement of the governors in the monitoring of the college performance. The recently established Students Quality and Standards Committee (SQSC) is part of the college constitution. It involves all levels of staff, three governors and students. Students are given pre-meeting guidance and are able to contribute to the action points developed at the meeting. Governors are able to hear students' views directly from the students. The first meeting of the SQSC was also to update governors on the self-assessment process and the interpretation of achievement and standards data. It is planned for governors to be involved in setting and monitoring retention and achievement targets. Targets devised by college management will be submitted to the SQSC for approval before they are presented at the full governors' meeting. New governors now benefit from a thorough induction process. Governors are now appraised by the chair and deputy chair of governors.

What progress has been made in ensuring the consistent application of quality assurance across the college?	Significant

The college has made significant progress in ensuring consistency of application of quality assurance across the college. Several initiatives were already in place immediately prior to the inspection but their development has continued and many are now more fully embedded in the quality assurance process. The observation of teaching and learning has been reviewed and revised. Observers now receive thorough training. Dual observations take place with both observers' judgements being used to assess the effectiveness of the session. New documentation requires the completion of specific and measurable targets which are linked to a teaching and learning improvement tracker system. A teaching and learning improvement manager appointed just before the inspection has now had the opportunity to work with staff to improve teaching and learning. Staff can refer themselves or may be

referred after an observation. Feedback through learners' views contributes directly to the development of teaching and learning. It is planned that all quality improvement data will be held electronically by July 2008. It is the intention of the college to further strengthen the self-assessment process by producing sector subject area reporting in addition to the existing report reflecting the college structure. Each academy has nominated staff with responsibility for quality assurance. Targets are now better understood and can be used by curriculum managers during staff appraisals. An audit and inspection team sample the quality evidence held on the central system and are able to attend meetings to check progress. Quality groups for curriculum and support services meet regularly to ensure consistency of approach to quality throughout the college.

What actions has the college taken to ensure the consistency of curriculum management across the college?	Reasonable

Curriculum management is more consistent. A new curriculum quality group (CQG) with a strong focus on quality and sharing of good practice now meets monthly. This replaced the previous curriculum management group which had a wider remit. Curriculum managers and especially new managers have thorough training in quality systems and the use of the new electronic system for holding information centrally. Curriculum managers have had extensive training in the observation of teaching and learning to ensure consistency across the college. Destination data is now held centrally in a common format rather than by each individual manager. Academies and curriculum managers now have a more consistent approach to celebrating achievement. Cross-college training and sharing of good practice on working with employers takes place. Cross-curriculum internal verification systems have been further developed. Curriculum managers have easier access to targets and use these during the individual staff appraisals. Two curriculum managers attend the newly formed students' quality and standards group and report back to the CQG. Curriculum managers now work across the college to produce the additional self-assessment reports based on sector subject areas. This has contributed to further sharing of resources and good practice for example between the sixth form academy and the mathematics, science and information and communication technology faculty.