

Report summary

Local accountability and autonomy in colleges

This survey reviewed how well colleges are responding to the new freedoms and flexibilities in determining their priorities and developing their curriculum to meet local community needs. It also aimed to identify barriers to progress in meeting local needs, and the features of best practice. Inspectors evaluated the effectiveness of colleges' work with their local strategic partners to help ensure that the learning and skills provision supported local economic growth. Inspectors explored how well governors held senior managers to account for this work. They visited 13 further education colleges and four sixth form colleges and also used evidence from 15 inspections carried out between September and November 2012.

Key findings

- Almost all the 17 further education colleges and around two thirds of the 15 sixth form colleges in the survey had made some changes to their curriculum structure and provision to align these more closely with perceived local needs, and to enhance learners' skills for employment. In particular, this work generally focused well on developing new or enhanced provision for young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs); longer-term unemployed adults; disabled learners and those who have special educational needs; and residents from socially and/or economically disadvantaged areas. However, destination data were generally not sufficiently complete for managers to evaluate fully the impact of these programmes on supporting learners into work.
- In recent years, government policy, funding and quality assurance mechanisms have encouraged colleges to base their curriculum offer on funded qualifications and to focus on success rates as the key performance measure. Few incentives have actively encouraged colleges to adapt their provision to ensure that learners acquired the skills that local employers needed to support economic growth.

- Corporations received and monitored at least some data on learners' qualification success rates in all of the 17 colleges visited, but there were considerable variations in the range and type of data they used. Not all corporations received equally comprehensive and objective data about all aspects of college performance. Governors acknowledged that they were less well informed about the wider aspects of the quality of teaching and learning and the impact of actions taken to secure improvement. Where governors did not always have a comprehensive analysis of better and weaker areas of provision they were unable to provide an unambiguous view of college performance.
- Managers and governors did not fully evaluate their work with, and its impact on, local communities and employers. A lack of coherent, consistent sector-wide measures of all learners' destinations, and systems to track their progression over time, hampered the colleges' ability to demonstrate how effectively they developed learners' wider skills and supported their progression to sustainable employment.
- Only three of the 17 colleges visited had made significant changes to their curriculum content and structure in all curriculum areas to develop learners' employability skills and to prepare them for progression to employment. In the other colleges, some curriculum areas engaged well with local employers, but this was not done systematically across the provision.
- At the time of the survey visits, governors in 12 of the 17 colleges visited confirmed that they had already received briefings, or had held discussions, about the impact of raising the participation age. However, there was little evidence on how this was translated into specific or detailed plans for changing their provision to respond to the raising of the participation age to 17 in September 2013 and 18 by 2015. Inspectors found little evidence of clear collaborative planning between schools and the post-16 sector for how they would ensure that all 16-year-olds would be directed towards purposeful and relevant programmes from September 2013. This is particularly important for learners whose core aim will be at intermediate level or below.
- Fewer than half the 12 different areas visited had LEPs that were well established and beginning to have a demonstrable impact on local planning and provision. Further education remains under-represented at the highest strategic level on the LEP boards. Only eight of the 17 colleges visited worked directly with their LEP on planning and decision-making. Only around one third of all LEPs in the survey had a direct representative of further education and skills on the LEP board. This meant that the majority of LEPs were not sufficiently well informed about learning and skills provision in their area, or the role of local colleges in reducing unemployment and supporting economic growth.
- In six of the 17 visits to colleges, managers did not have sufficient labour market intelligence to help them to plan their provision. In these areas, this information was not shared well enough between LEPs, local authorities and

other key partners so that planning and oversight of all provision for young people and adults across the local area were informed and coherent. A lack of comprehensive, current data hampered providers' efforts to respond quickly to the needs of local employers or specific communities.

- College managers interviewed for the survey were concerned that planning for 11 to 16 schools, new schools and academies intending to open sixth forms did not always take into account the wider post-16 provision in an area. They also reported that historic differentials in funding rates, VAT rules and eligibility for free school meals financially favoured school sixth forms over colleges and militated against open and fair competition.
- It is too early to determine whether the revised arrangements for careers guidance in schools are effective in ensuring that all young people receive impartial and comprehensive guidance on all their options for progression and sufficient guidance on related employment opportunities.¹

¹ The Education Act of 2011 placed a new duty on schools to provide independent, impartial and comprehensive advice and guidance for all students in Years 9, 10 and 11 from September 2012.

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