

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: The Sheffield College
Date of visit: 20 November 2006

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit. It focuses on the themes explored during the visit and does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the college's performance.

Achievement and standards

At the inspection in March, retention rates were high at level 3 and satisfactory at levels 1 and 2. Have retention rates improved at levels 1 and 2 in 2005/06?

- There has been an overall improvement in retention rates. The retention rate for level 2 courses improved by 8% in 2005/06 but the overall rate for level 1 courses fell by 2%. The retention rate on courses for 16-18 year olds at level 1 improved but the retention rate on adult courses fell. The overall retention rate on level 3 courses has remained high.

In March, pass rates at levels 2 and 3 were high and the pass rate at level 1 had dipped but was still satisfactory. Has the pass rate risen at level 1? Are pass rates at levels 2 and 3 still high?

- The pass rate on long level 1 courses has risen by 10%. The pass rate on level 1 courses for 16-18 year olds has risen by 3% and the pass rate for adult students has risen by 15%. Pass rates have remained high on level 2 and 3 courses.

What does the 2005/06 value added data show?

- The value added data from the learner achievement tracker (LTA) show that around 90% of learners are achieving the grades that are expected of them and only 3% achieve grades that are lower than expected. Students achieve lower grades than expected on: GCE A-level drama, French and law; GCE AS music technology; BTEC national diploma in manufacturing engineering and multimedia software; and AVCE business and travel & tourism. Students achieve higher grades than expected on: GCE A-level art & design, geography, history and media/film studies; GCE AS further mathematics; and the BTEC national diploma in sports science.

Any improvement in key skills success rates in 2005/06?

- Key skills success rates in 2005/06 have increased significantly but still remain low. The college has successfully devised a number of strategies to improve key skills achievements including team teaching with specialist and vocational teachers. The greater successes have been at level 1 and also in communications at level 3. The college is making good progress towards achieving its Local Learning and Skills Council (LLSC) targets for key skills success rates.

Work-based learning achievements improved in 2005 and were good. Has the improvement continued?

- Work-based learning achievements continued to improve in 2006 and remain good. The achievements of adult learners are better than those of learners aged 16-18 in the completion of both advanced and apprentice frameworks. However, the latest data is showing that the gap between the two age groups is getting narrower. Learners in business administration and law, construction, planning and the built environment and dental have the highest achievement rates with good improvements on previous years. The time learners take to complete their modern apprenticeship programme is improving and fewer learners are taking longer than the expected training time to achieve. Key skills achievement is improving and is good.

At the last AAV attendance was an issue as there were pockets of low attendance across the college. Attendance was judged satisfactory at the inspection. Have attendance rates improved since last year?

- The college has made improving students' attendance a priority. Overall attendance rates at the three colleges are currently 85%, 87% and 87% compared to an overall rate of 80% last year. A more robust system for recording of absence has been introduced. Current data show that there has been a considerable improvement in attendance in some of the areas where it was low last year. The most significant improvements are in health and social care and sports science. Early indications are that attendance is still an issue in a number of other areas, for example in the Skills for Life provision.

Will the college meet its enrolment targets this year?

- The college is confident that it will meet its 16-18 recruitment target. It is currently around 50 students short of a target of 6000 but is introducing a course for young people who are not in education, employment and training (NEET), which should make up the shortfall. It is too early to say whether the adult target will be met. The increase in fees has not had a detrimental effect and the college believes that it will hit the target. The number of apprentices on work-based learning courses is currently 9 short of a target of 425 but the number is rising slowly. The college has deliberately reduced its target for learners aged 14-16 in order to improve the quality and sustainability of the provision.

Quality of education and training

What has been done to improve the use of questioning as a formative assessment tool since the inspection?

- Training sessions have been offered to address any weaknesses in teaching identified through lesson observations or inspection. In addition, teachers are encouraged to observe peers who are skilled in the use of questioning where this is appropriate.

In work-based learning, is more use being made of the direct observation of apprentices' performance in the work place?

- More use is being made of direct observation of apprentices in the workplace. There is better use of a wide range of evidence and assessments are being done at a time and location to suit learners' individual needs. Co-ordination between on- and – off-the job training is better integrated.

Has the college's enrichment programme been promoted more effectively this year?

- The enrichment programme has been actively promoted using posters, flyers and an enrichment fair at Hillsborough College but the level of awareness amongst staff and students is very variable. The number of students taking part has doubled at Hillsborough College, however, fewer than 20% of students are involved. Despite the improved promotional activity, participation in the enrichment programme is still low.

What has been done to improve punctuality and attendance?
Has it been successful?

- The college has introduced a number of systems to improve punctuality and attendance. Lateness is now recorded in registers and on lesson observation forms thus raising the profile and importance with teachers. There are notices on classroom doors to remind learners about the importance of punctuality. Various systems are being trialled to improve punctuality, for example, the introduction of a yellow card system. None have proved to be universally successful but they have served to raise awareness. The student development officers have made the most significant difference. They contact all learners who are missing from lessons and encourage them to attend. They telephone, text and send out cards. The current attendance figures show an overall improvement on last year and teachers feel that punctuality is improving.

Leadership and management

What action has been taken to strengthen the action planning and monitoring that follows a lesson observation?

- The lesson observation system has been strengthened considerably. There is a clear procedure for action planning any weaknesses following a lesson observation and sufficient time is allowed. Training may be offered or peer observation suggested. However, it is unclear how the action plan is to be monitored and there is no follow up observation of teachers within the scheme, of lessons judged to be inadequate. The lesson observation system is still not as effective as it could be in driving up the quality of teaching and learning.

Has the link between lesson observations and appraisal been strengthened?

- The timings of lesson observations and appraisals have been synchronised so that any issues arising from observations can be picked up in appraisal. Any target setting and action planning that followed the observation can also be reinforced.

Other observations from the visit not identified in the pre-visit analysis

- The 2005/06 data show considerable improvements in the success rates on those courses identified as having low success rates in the March inspection. For example, GCE AS human biology success rates have risen by 19%, national diploma in construction by 31%, NVQ level 1 bakery by 29% and ESOL level 1 by 29%.
- The quality assurance systems are robust and they are clearly understood and valued by staff who are provided with comprehensive data that are easily understood.
- Hillsborough College (opened in September 2005) has quickly established a good local reputation and is attracting increasing numbers of students.