

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Riverside College Halton
Date of visit: 27-28 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

Trends in success, retention and achievement rates in 2004/05 and 2005/06

- At the former Halton College, the overall success rate in 2004/05 on long courses remained high at 71%, following a three-year rising trend which was significantly above the national increase over the same period. The success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 on long level 1 and 2 courses were outstanding; at level 3 the success rate was below the national average due to low retention rates. The overall pass rate for adults on long courses was high, although retention rates were below the national averages. Short course success rates had also shown a rising trend and were around the national average. Data for 2005/06 was incomplete at the time of the AAV and was therefore not used to judge the college's 2005/06 performance.
- At the former Widnes and Runcorn Sixth Form College, the overall success rate in 2004/05 on long courses at all levels was low and had been significantly below the national average for three years. Retention rates on long courses were poor for both age groups. While the pass rate for adults was above the national average, for learners aged 16 to 18 the pass rate was very low. Using unvalidated data from 2005/06 (ie before the merger), there was a significant increase in the overall success rate on long courses at level 3 for learners aged 16 to 18, although this remained well below the (2004/05) national average. At levels 1 and 2, success rates remained very low. For learners aged 16 to 18, retention rates were lower than national averages at all levels, most notably on level 2 courses. On GCE A level courses, the retention rate was 10 percentage points above the national average. Pass rates on level 2 and 3 courses were well below the national averages.

Work-based learning achievements

- The college has developed a series of useful strategies to improve its work-based learning in the last year but the full impact is yet to be seen. Overall success rates improved in work-based learning in 2005/06, but remained below the national average. There were improvements in success rates in construction and business but in engineering the success rate declined, with no framework achievements recorded in 2005/06. The college's overall timely success rate also declined and was well below the national average. The achievement rate of key skills is low but showed improvement in 2005/06. The monitoring of learners' progress is now much more rigorous and is helping to identify areas of concern and to support improvements in learners' achievements and skills development.

Progress made by learners (value added and distance travelled data)

- New measures of success data for the former Halton College show that learners on most courses make at least the progress expected from their prior attainment. The college has a well-established internal value-added system for judging the progress of learners and monitors these data carefully.
- Value added data for 2004/05 used in the recent inspection at the former Widnes and Runcorn Sixth Form College show that GCE A and AS level learners generally achieved lower grades than expected from their prior attainment in two out of the last three years. In 2005/06 (i.e. before the merger), on GCE A-level courses, the overall value added score showed the progress made by learners was broadly average. On GCE AS courses, the overall value added score placed the college in the bottom 10% of all colleges in the survey, showing that these learners continued to achieve well below the grades expected.

Trends in attendance rates

- At the former Halton College, where electronic registration was introduced across all curriculum areas last year, the average attendance increased from 76% in 2004/05 to 83% in 2005/06. Around 80% of areas increased their attendance rates. At the former Widnes and Runcorn Sixth Form College there was also an increase in overall attendance rates from 71% to 78% in 2005/06, but this remained below sixth form college averages. At both colleges, there was a reduction in the level of variation in attendance rates between curriculum areas. Contributory factors to improved attendance include revised guidance procedures, strengthened pastoral support, better

co-ordination of the work of curriculum managers with the retention improvement officer, and the improvement of tutors' skills. The policies and procedures for monitoring attendance are seen by learners as fair and appropriate. The college recognises that there remains some inconsistency in tutorial practice and in the monitoring of punctuality.

Quality of education and training

How the college is supporting teachers in developing approaches to providing for the needs of all learners in their teaching

- The college's lesson observation system is rigorous and effective in supporting improvements. Several strategies have been developed to address areas of weakness. The professional development and updating of teachers' skills is helping to improve the standards of teaching to meet learners' needs. Advanced teaching and learning practitioners are helping to share good practice. Regular audits of schemes of work and lesson plans are ensuring greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning. Accommodation has been refurbished to improve the learning environment or, where it is inadequate, it is being taken out of use. Generally the access to ILT resources is good and investment in this and staff training is continuing. However some rooms, for example in science, currently have limited ILT availability. A minority of lesson observation reports do not focus sufficiently on the progress made by learners in lessons and the standard of their work.

Changes in curriculum area self-assessment grades and the reasons for them

Actions taken by the college to improve the quality of provision, and their impact, particularly in areas which have been judged inadequate either through inspection or self assessment

- In 2004/05, three areas of learning at the former Halton College were judged to be outstanding in the self assessment report; five were good, six satisfactory and two were inadequate. In the most recent self-assessment, the two areas of learning judged to be inadequate in 2004/05 (engineering and ICT), are now judged to be satisfactory. In these areas, comprehensive staff development has been put in place for managers. Specific training has

been provided to match their needs in subject specific or leadership and management topics. Part of their training includes mentoring from senior staff. In some cases, new managers have been appointed. Overall, recovery plans have been applied successfully in weaker areas.

- The social science provision judged to be inadequate at the inspection of the former Widnes and Runcorn Sixth Form College is now within the merged college's humanities provision, which is judged in the self-assessment report to be satisfactory overall. Here many success rates and value added scores have improved, although the success rate on GCE AS sociology declined. The provision in science and mathematics remains inadequate. Appointments of new managers for this area will be completed soon. The college is planning to make improvements to the science laboratories, which continue to provide an unsatisfactory learning environment. Staff in this area are working well with their new managers to put in place appropriate arrangements to secure better outcomes for learners.
- Learners aged 16 to 18 interviewed reported that teaching and learning has improved this year and that improvements have been made to the pastoral support they receive. Adult learners felt well supported and stated that they received good teaching. Some adult learners expressed a view that the enrichment activities should be available to them to address better their subject and personal development needs.

Leadership and management

How well the post-inspection action plan addresses weaknesses

- The college has made rapid progress in revising and implementing the post-inspection action plan since the merger. For example, some changes to the accommodation and resources at the Cronton site have had a significant impact upon the learning environment for many learners. Weaknesses identified in the inspection report are comprehensively addressed in the action plan. Actions identified are appropriate and the most recent review of progress shows some early signs that they are being successful. Robust measures have been put in place to improve teaching and learning, although the success measures in the action plan do not concentrate sufficiently on the impact on learning.

Changes in management as a result of merger and how well these are supporting implementation of change

- The college has acted swiftly to develop and implement a new management structure, but has sought to build on the good practice from both colleges. The interim principal and senior team have, with good support from governors, provided strong leadership throughout the merger. Appointments of college directors covering both curriculum and business support areas have been made. These managers are promoting well the growing sense of team work between staff at the two former colleges and have supported good progress on the completion of the merged college's self-assessment report. Good communications throughout the merger process have helped to maintain staff morale. A renewed vibrancy is evident at the Cronton campus, where changes to accommodation and resources have resulted in much improved learning environments for many. The principal works at the campus for part of the week and senior managers will be based there shortly. Although the designation of the Cronton site has been identified in plans as a sixth form centre, the future vision for this campus is not yet fully understood by all staff. Some challenges lie ahead with regard to staff pay and conditions following the merger.

How well communications have been maintained during the merger

- Communications have been good throughout a period of rapid change. Clear open communication channels have been maintained, including meetings with professional associations. Working groups have been set up to share views including on key themes such as teaching and learning, as well as on general college procedures. Regular e-mails and other communications from the principal, staff meetings and joint staff development events have helped to create a shared ethos. Electronic communications between campuses are generally good, although some staff are currently experiencing difficulty in reaching others via e-mail.

Arrangements for monitoring the performance of the college by managers and governors

- Senior managers and governors have a keen awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the college. They have high expectations and receive regular reports on performance against targets and national averages. Progress on the post-inspection action plan is reviewed regularly. The professional development and review (PDR) process has been revised to be more objective and effective. It is more timely in identifying issues and areas of concern for staff and the college. Reports from PDRs are monitored by staff in human resources to check for common themes across the college. Internal audits of PDRs are carried out to ensure conformity and consistency.

- Governors have maintained a strong interest in the college and its performance relative to the sector. Their continued commitment and expertise has supported the college extremely well during the merger.

The financial position of the college

- Following the merger, the college is now financial category B. The college has invested wisely in upgrading accommodation at the Cronton Campus and is considering options for investment at Kingsway to address problems with curtain walling. This may result in a new building. Despite heavy existing and planned investment, the college is planning to reach category A status by 2008. Recruitment of learners aged 16 to 18 in September 2006 was lower than planned. Nevertheless, prudent management means that the current financial position of the college is not threatened and early information about next year's recruitment show a rise in applications.

Arrangements for safeguarding of children and young people

- The college has appropriate policies in place for the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. These policies are reviewed annually and have been developed in liaison with a member of the LSCB. The college complies with recently announced DfES requirements and has compiled a central list of checks carried out. Relevant senior staff have received training on child protection, and the child protection officer has regular training from the local authority. Managers had training earlier this year. Staff are aware of the policy and the name of the nominated officer to whom they should refer disclosures, and further training for them is planned. Training for governors is also taking place shortly. The college works well with the Connexions service, for example on the strategy for young people not in education, employment and training and is in discussion with their staff to try to ensure that all young people who are in, or leaving, public care are identified so that appropriate support can be given. Partnerships with social services are good.

The robustness of self-assessment at curriculum area level

- There is effective use of data for making judgements. Self-assessment reports are self-critical and in the sample examined, the judgements were accurate. Appropriate strengths and weaknesses which have the most significant impact on learners are identified. Reports are detailed and evaluative.

Arrangements for commercial updating of lecturers

- The arrangements for the commercial updating and recording of staff involvement in such activities have improved. For example, training has been given to construction and engineering staff on current health and safety guidance and changes to legislation. A number of staff have taken part in industrial placements relevant to their vocational area. Revised PDR processes better inform staff development, including for the commercial updating of staff.

How the college is utilising its involvement with QIA and the self-regulation pilot to support improvements

- The college has shown strong commitment as a member of the North West peer-referencing pilot. The college views the main benefits from its involvement in the pilot as the support for the development of its own quality assurance processes, opportunities for sharing good practice and in building its capacity for further improvement. Sharing of good practice has been at all levels including at curriculum area level. The rigour of lesson observations has been enhanced through the use of subject specialists from other colleges and the joint moderation of findings. The college has received good support from the group in re-drafting the action plan for the inadequate provision at the former Widnes and Runcorn Sixth Form College. Subsequent to early discussions with the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), when the peer review and self-assessment cycles are complete, the college will be employing its services to support improvements in identified areas of weakness.

Any other observations from the visit not identified in the pre-visit analysis:

None