

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Ashton Sixth Form College
Date of visit: 5 December 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

Success rates at levels 1 and 2 over the last two year have been above the national average. Success rates for level 3 have been below the national average although demonstrating year-on-year improvement. Has there been further improvement in 2005/06?

- Success rates for level 1 courses continue to be significantly above the national average, although they declined from the high 2005 figure. At level 2 success rates demonstrated a significant improvement from 78% in 2004/05 to 85% in 2005/06. Success rates for level 3 were below the national average from 2003 to 2005 but with an improving trend. In 2006 they were at the national average for similar colleges. Retention is above the national average at all levels. Achievement at levels 1 and 2 is significantly above the average but at level 3 achievements are just below. Achievement at GCE A-level has consistently been above the national average. At AS-level in 2006 it was below the national average. The college is aware of this issue and it forms a key focus in the college improvement plan and the self assessment. Areas of concern have been identified and improvement strategies and action plans have been implemented. The college has a good record of addressing improvement. GCSE results in 2006 were very good. Value added data for level 3 courses indicate good to very good progress set against prior attainment.

Quality of education and training

How responsive is the staff development programme in promoting better teaching and learning?

- The college has a very strong staff development programme that has been developed systematically over the last two years. It has acquired a strong focus on intervention to aid improvement in under-performing areas. For example, focused staff development has contributed to the transformation of mathematics from an under-performing area to one attaining outstanding results. The focus on improving teaching and learning is very strong. A peer observation programme has been introduced and has proved both effective and successful in further enabling the sharing, discussion and transfer of good practice. Currently additional staff development is focused on underperforming areas largely at GCE AS level. In the open and self-critical culture established within the college, staff welcome the additional support and intervention. The sharing of best practice is a crucial element of the college's quality assurance of teaching and learning. A key focus for staff development during 2006 has been capacity building to respond to Skills for Life needs amongst students within their main programme of study. The system of subject learning coaches works well with good dissemination of Standards Unit materials.

Tameside is both an area of significant competition for post-16 education but with some low 14-19 performance indicators. How is the College addressing partnerships and local needs?

- The college continues to work well with other local colleges within the framework of the 14-19 local initiatives. The college has also been effective in developing partnerships and initiatives with a number of local schools and has developed a robust 14-16 programme. It makes a strong contribution to the local community and in particular to the development of the 14-19 education and learning partnership. For example, it is actively involved in preparation for the introduction of the specialist diplomas. The college continues to be committed to an extensive range of life-long learning programmes that are well focused and successful, and responsive to local needs. For example, the college is currently running 13 classes in Skills for Life, literacy and numeracy at entry level and level 1, mostly off site at community venues. At level 2 the college has been successful in obtaining a Train to Gain contract for public services and care, and ICT. The college has presently 3 European Social Fund (ESF) contracts aimed at level 2.

How has the college developed the curriculum during 2005/06 to respond to student needs?

- A key focus for the college in 2005/06 has been the introduction of literacy classes and an extra numeracy class. All students without GCSE A*-C in English and mathematics were offered specialist guidance and encouraged to enrol on the programme relevant to their needs. The programme was in response to the college's evaluation that GCSE English courses and additional learning support were not fully meeting the needs of all students without level 2 skills in English. The programmes offer students a number of opportunities to take national tests at levels 1 and 2 as well as catering for students who start programmes later in the year. For the student it builds a broader skills base to aid achievement and progression. The achievement and progression rates for students undertaking additional classes in literacy and numeracy in 2005/06 was very good.
- The college has piloted the online initial assessment, Key Skills Builder, with vocational students and this has resulted in a significant increase in the number of level 3 students accessing additional learning support (ALS). In 2005/06 134 academic vocational students at level 3 received ALS compared to 74 the previous year. All students who received ALS in 2005/06 achieved.

Leadership and management

The college was inspected in December 2004. How effectively has it addressed the areas for improved cited in the inspection report?

- The college has made excellent progress in addressing the areas for improvement cited in its December 2004 inspection report. The college has developed a strong, self-critical culture of continuous improvement.
- Achievement rates, particularly at GCE A-level have demonstrated improvement. GCE A-level value added has improved significantly. The college continues to seek improvement in the achievement rates at GCE AS level. Four courses graded 4 for achievement and standards in the 2004/05 self-assessment, through the employment of focused intervention strategies, improved to Grade 3 by November 2006.

These changes in grading are supported with evidence of improved achievement, retention and value added.

- Achievement and standards in advanced mathematics show significant improvement. For example at GCE A-level mathematics the college pass rate is now 100%, some 15% above the national average. This trend is demonstrated across the full range of programmes in mathematics.
- Quality assurance procedures have improved with a greater focus on data analysis, evaluation of performance and action planning to aid continuous improvement.
- Staff development has become a crucial area for intervention to improve performance through the development of well focused improvement strategies for teaching and learning and through the promotion of best practice. Action plans for under-performing courses include peer referencing, benchmarking and external visits to and from colleges cited as having good or outstanding practice in the subject area.