

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Oldham Sixth Form College
Date of visit: 8 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

Over a significant period of time the college has maintained an improving trend in achievement, retention and success rates. Has this trend been maintained in 2005/06?

- The college continues to record very high achievement rates. Achievement on GCE AS and A-level and AVCE courses continues to be above the national averages. The college A-level pass rate for 2005/06 was 98.7% and the AS pass rate was 90.7%. The AVCE pass rate was 96%. At GCE AS and A-level higher grade achievement remained below the national average. On AVCE courses the achievement of higher rates was significantly above the national average. Applied GCSEs, intermediate GNVQs and GCSE re-sit results were all significantly above the national averages. Value added is outstanding at both AS and A level. A small number of subjects recorded a negative value added residual and the college is addressing this through a well-focused improvement strategy. Courses identified as underperforming in 2004/05 demonstrated significant improvement in 2005/06.
- The college has improved success rates for both long and short courses year-on-year. Success rates improved for all levels in 2006. The overall college success rate has improved from 76% to 84% in three years and is now at the 90th percentile. Retention rates are above the national averages for similar colleges with the exception of two-year VCE courses.
- Progression to higher education (HE) is excellent. The college enrolls 51% of its learners from deprived areas, many with no family tradition of HE. In 2005/06, 71% of second year level 3 students progressed to HE, with another 11% taking a gap year and progressing to HE in 2007. Progression from level 2 to level 3 courses within the college was 80% in 2006.

Quality of education and training

The college noted as an area for improvement in its 2005/06 self-assessment report (SAR) the grading of observed lessons because they 'generously' exceeded judgements made at the last inspection. Is this cause for concern?

- In 2005/06, 98% of lessons were judged to be good or better with 16% of lessons graded as outstanding, 82% as good and 2% as satisfactory. At the last inspection in March 2004, 82% of lessons were judged to be good or better. Since the last inspection there has been a continued focus on improving teaching and learning at level 2. The success of this programme is evident in outstanding level 2 achievement and in the high percentage of students progressing from level 2 to level 3. Value added analysis indicates excellent teaching across the curriculum. The college has robust quality assurance systems and works with other sixth form colleges to validate lesson observation and SAR grading. Further measures have been taken in 2006/07 to further strengthen the observation, verification and moderation systems.

The quality of additional learning support has been central to the college's widening participation and continuous improvement strategies. Given increased demands is additional learning support maintaining its success?

- Additional learning support continues to be exceptionally well managed and very responsive to the college's widening participation strategy. There is effective use of individual learning plans, and systematic setting of targets and learning aims. Monitoring and action planning are thorough and focused. Support for learners with dyslexia is excellent. Support for learners with specific learning difficulties is very strong: of these students 92% of Year 12 and 88% of Year 13 students were on or above target. The pass rate at GCE A-level for these students was 98% in 2005/06, with a higher grades pass rate of 52%. Their retention is very good at 91%. Learners with physical disabilities are very well supported with both the use of assistive technologies and very good links for external support. Additional learning support covers the whole cohort of students and is key to the college's continued success in raising achievement and widening participation. Literacy support is particularly strong.

A central theme for the college has been to promote increased participation across Oldham. Is the college continuing to demonstrate success in this area?

- The college is an inclusive and diverse community and remains highly responsive to local needs. Some 37% of learners are from minority ethnic backgrounds, 33% are from an Asian heritage background, 51% are from economically and socially disadvantaged areas and 61% are in receipt of educational maintenance allowances. The college's success has been noted above in terms of year-on year improvement in achievement, achievement above the national average for sixth form colleges, excellent progression from level 2 to 3 and excellent progression to higher education. The college plays a central role in the local learning partnership and the development and implementation of the 14 to 19 development plan. It has established strong partnership with local schools. For example, the development of the national certificate in sport is a joint development with a partnership school. The introduction of a modular GCSE in mathematics at both intermediate and foundation level responds to the increased numbers of learners without a grade C in mathematics. With other partners, the college has successfully driven up participation in further education. Enrolments have increased year-on-year; the college enrolled 2,120 full-time equivalent (FTE) learners aged 16 to 18 in September 2006.
- The junior university project is a development led by the college on behalf of the Oldham learning partnership to increase participation post-16. The six transition mentors have worked with over 800 'at risk' learners since its inception. A junior university website houses materials for level 2 and 3 courses; it provides a focus both on raising achievement and encouraging progression. In 2005/06 a mentor was appointed to work with pupils in four partnership schools to support raising achievement in GCSE mathematics. The impact of liaison and transition work can be evidenced firstly in the increased applications to the college; secondly, in increased applications from partner schools; and, thirdly, in increased progression into further education across Oldham. The second annual report on the junior university notes that in 2006 some 196 pupils were mentored from Year 9, 277 from Year 10 and 341 from Year 11. At the college, 212 students received junior university support.

Leadership and management

Has management continued to maintain a culture of continuous improvement against a background of year-on-year improvement and high performance?

- College management has established a very strong self-critical culture that aims for continuous improvement in curriculum provision and learner services. College success rates reflect further improvement in 2005/06. Underperforming areas in 2004/05 have demonstrated significant improvement over the last year. For example, the pass rate in AS philosophy improved from 64% in 2004/05 to 84% in 2005/06; the pass rate in AS law improved from 71% to 89% and the pass rate in AS computing improved from 55% to 85%. The college has an excellent record in addressing underperformance and sustaining improvement. There are positive and on-going strategies to challenge the most able. In 2005/06 there was a 5% increase in the proportion of 'A' grades of the most able at A-level GCE.
- During 2005/06, the college commenced a programme to enable managers to analyse the value-added performance of different groups of learners. This has led to greater in-depth analysis and strategic planning to increase performance. For example, in 2005/06 females surpassed males in value added. A closer evaluation of the data showed that where courses were all female or predominantly female value added was high and significant. Where courses were male or predominantly male value added achievement was high but not as significant. The college is now revisiting work on boys' achievement within the context of predominantly male learning environments. In part the college maintains and improves the quality of its provision through detailed analysis of data and highly focused action planning. Quality assurance systems are very rigorous. Senior managers drive an improvement agenda albeit within a sensitive and respectful working culture. The work of the college central quality assurance group, 'the Star Chamber', to promote improvement is significant. Self-assessment procedures are transparent, participatory and self-critical. Monitoring and action planning impact strongly on student performance and services.