

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Telford College of Arts & Technology
Date of visit: 10 October 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

Were high success rates and improving trends in standards maintained in 2005/06?

- At the end of 2005, an overall long course success rate of 75% marked the college out as one of the highest performing of the large general further education colleges. Data for 2005/06, though incomplete at the time of the annual assessment visit, nevertheless indicate that very high success rates have at least been maintained and the trend of improvement has continued. The college is confident that overall success rates for both age groups will be higher again at all levels. In particular, the very strong trend of improvement in retention rates has been sustained due to the extremely effective retention strategies deployed. This is strikingly evident on courses for adult students, which include the college's extensive employer-based provision, where overall retention rates, which were below national averages three years ago, are now at least 15% above average at all levels. For students aged 16 to 18, retention rates are about 15% above average at levels 1 and 2, and have improved to reach the national average at level 3, where retention has previously been below average. Provisional data indicate that the very high success rates on short courses have also been maintained.

Success rates on WBL programmes

- Full framework success rates have improved significantly from 31% in 2005 to 57% in 2006, which is above national average. Timely success rates have also significantly improved from 19% in 2005 to 45% in 2006, which is well above national average. Success rates on apprenticeships have doubled to 52%, which is about average; while success rates on advanced apprenticeships have improved to 62%, well above the national average.

Success rates on the college's extensive employer-based provision

- Success rates on employer-based provision have significantly increased over the last three years: from an overall 66% in 2004, to 79% in 2005, and, according to the college's provisional data, to between 82% and 92% in 2006.

The total volume of enrolments on employer-based provision has decreased due to reduced numbers on key skills and European computer driving licence programmes, but the college now works with more employers. The college has responded to employers' requests in shaping its curriculum offer and has also established an additional learning centre on an employer's premises, bringing the total of such centres to eleven. Since the inspection in May 2006, the college now provides Train to Gain programmes in the East Midlands and West Midlands.

Quality of education and training

How effectively has the college responded to the need to strengthen aspects of the observation of teaching and learning process (a key area for improvement identified in the recent inspection report)?

- The post-inspection action plan gives appropriate attention to this area for improvement. Actions taken, or being taken, by the college represent incremental steps designed to strengthen the reliability of the college's own profile of the quality of lessons which results from the internal observation of teaching and learning. From this year, teachers will no longer be given notice of the specific lesson to be observed, but will be notified of a week-long 'window' during which an observation will take place; a stronger focus on the quality of learning taking place in lessons is being promoted through supplementary training for observers; the co-ordinating manager will undertake more dual observations with other observers to promote consistency in judgements; and an element of external validation is being introduced through a pairing arrangement with another college. It is too early to judge the impact of these changes. There are no evident plans to further extend the rigour or frequency of the lesson observation system in future years. Lack of any element of direct observation of practice, including lesson observations, in the appraisal system remains a constraint on it becoming a more effective performance management tool.

Review of entry level, level 1 provision and provision for students aged 14 to 16 in the context of the relatively low post-16 staying on rate and relatively high number of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) in Telford & Wrekin

- The college demonstrates a strong commitment to improving the below average post-16 staying on rate locally, for all young people and for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and to helping to reduce the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training. The college provides a good range of learning opportunities for 14 to 16 year olds, of whom about 500 each year take courses at the college through the increased flexibility programme and other school link initiatives. The revised curriculum proposed

for 2007 has been strongly influenced by the views of the schools, although the extent to which these accurately reflect the needs and interests of the pupils and their parents is not clear. The plans represent an imaginative approach to offering an even broader range of vocational learning opportunities at levels 1 and 2. The re-focused schools liaison service is helping to strengthen the college's links with individual schools and enabling the college to be even more responsive. The college development plan targets further growth in the number of Year 10 and 11 students at the college, and this is expected to materialise with the implementation of the first specialised diplomas in 2008. The college is at the centre of local planning for the new diplomas through the Telford & Wrekin 13-19 Implementation Group.

- Over the last two years, significant improvements have been made to the college's provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those with more disaffected attitudes to education. The level 1 certificate in vocational studies has been developed across 7 vocational areas, making good use of specialist facilities inside and outside the college. This provides a good progression pathway for students from the skills for working life programme already established at entry level. Student numbers taking this qualification have more than doubled in the last two years and this is a key factor in the very marked, 55% increase in the number of students aged 16 to 18 studying full-time level 1 courses this year. Relationships with local special schools have been strengthened and an increasing number of their students aged infill onto the vocational pathways.

Steps taken to improve the cross-college enrichment programme

- The college has maintained its excellent range of curriculum enhancement activities and also increased its cross-college enrichment programme to include more sports activities and trips as well as informative sessions on a wide range of subjects. A termly calendar of enrichment activities has been introduced; well advertised on college notice boards and circulated to all staff and students. In addition, an enrichment leaflet and termly newsletter promote the activities available. The college's outstanding sports facilities are well used to provide extensive opportunities for students to participate in physical activities. Timetables across the college are arranged to allow students from any curriculum area to participate in college teams. There is a good range of lunchtime activities and after-college clubs. The college promotes sports to women under its well publicised 'girls allowed' initiative. Student youth advisors and student health advisors work well in promoting enrichment and collecting student feedback to inform future enrichment activities.

Steps being taken to improve the consistency of key skills provision

- The college has established a post-inspection quality improvement action plan specific to key skills. Staff development events have taken place to share good practice in key skills delivery. The on-line testing of key skills, piloted by the engineering and computing directorate, has been evaluated and the availability of on-line testing has been extended to all students. Two college managers have visited colleges with high success rates in key skills and have produced a report making further recommendations for improvement. Further staff development is planned to enable teachers to share good practice in key skills portfolio building and a key skills quality group will begin to meet half-termly. It is too early to judge the impact of these developments.

Leadership and management

No aspects of leadership and management were explored on this visit.