

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Walford & North Shropshire College
Date of visit: 22 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

What judgements can be made about the college's performance in 2005/06 and current trends?

- Data unavailable at the time of the last annual assessment visit (AAV) shows an overall success rate of 85% in 2004/05. Although data for 2003/04 is unreliable due to serious coding errors on the college management information system (MIS), this represented a clear improvement from an overall success rate of 78% in 2002/03. The improvement largely resulted from much higher success rates on short courses, from an overall 85% in 2003 to 95% in 2005, particularly for students aged 16 to 18. As the college MIS is currently being merged with that of another college and data is still being input, it is too early to examine headline success rates for 2005/06. The college anticipates an overall success rate in line with the previous year.
- The trend of improvement in the long course success rate is much more modest, from 61% in 2003 to 63% in 2005, which is in line with the national average. Attendance has remained around 80% for several years.
- For full-time learners, success rates on the main types of qualification in 2006 are broadly at or just above average. Success rates on vocational courses improved, but they declined slightly on GCE courses. ALIS data indicates a downward trend in value added on some GCE AS and A-level courses. General studies, geography and history continue to perform very strongly, but the number of subjects with negative value added residuals is increasing.
- In work-based learning, overall success rates for apprenticeships are just above the national average. They show a steady upward trend over the last three years. Timely success rates are below national averages and were markedly so for 2004/05. This could be explained by a group of engineering apprentices inherited from a failing provider.

Quality of education and training

How successful has the college been in improving the quality of students' experience in tutorials?

- Tutorials are seen as an integral part of the courses offered. All full time students have a weekly group tutorial. This is supplemented by one-to-one reviews during that tutorial or at lunchtimes as part of a 'floating' tutorial arrangement. Each course level has a common scheme of work for group tutorials. Quality teams have been established for tutorials and include the senior tutor, tutors and student representatives. There is now an annual audit of personal tutor files. New tutors are allocated an experienced tutor as mentor. Tutorials have been included in the observation of teaching and learning. Tutors are encouraged to take part in informal peer observations. Following a successful pilot, a new computer-based review system has been introduced which enables personal tutors to see the assessment outcomes from each of their students' teachers. In the latest satisfaction survey student ratings of tutorials increased by the targeted four points.

How well does the college work in partnership with community organisations and employers, and what is the impact of this collaboration?

- The college engages well with community organisations and a number of employers. It works with social services and charities throughout the county in the provision of skills for work or basic skills. It also provides also courses to prepare about 50 full-time students per year to enter the army. There are a number of projects which are widening participation, including 'Bridges to Work', which is European Social Fund (ESF) funded and provides vocational skills to community projects and to ex-offenders through the probation service. The college is part of a consortium of providers contracted to deliver Train to Gain training brokered by Business Link. The North Shropshire Volunteer Bureau refers voluntary sector organisations to the college for staff training in order to build their capacity. Franchising with six providers in 2005/06 was successful with 2030 students, 98% retention and a 91% success rate.

What contribution does the college make to extending vocational learning opportunities for students aged 14 to 16 in the locality?

- For its size, the college provides well for learners aged 14 to 16. Largely through the increasing flexibility programme (IFP), the college provides vocational and work-based learning opportunities for some

350 school students each year. Courses are provided at entry level, level 1 and level 2, together with a GCE AS in critical thinking. They encompass a good range of vocational areas in Oswestry, engineering in the south of the county and a range of land-based, work-based learning opportunities at Walford. Pass rates are high and over half of the young people subsequently progress into further education. There are two particularly interesting features of the provision: the college's deployment of learning support assistants, provided by the schools, to provide support across the entire cohort at the college's main campus; and the development of the 'paperless portfolio' for NVQ level 1 in engineering at the Aspire centre which has increased motivation, achievement and demand for places.

Does the college provide a good enrichment programme for full-time students?

- Much of the enrichment programme is scheduled on Wednesday afternoons, although there is also provision at other times. Whilst recognising the distinction themselves, the college is attempting to make curriculum enhancement and broader enrichment activities indistinguishable to students. Opportunities are varied and include representative sports, other recreational pursuits, such as fishing, and a band club and work on the college magazine as options. Attendance has previously been compulsory, but is now 'strongly encouraged'. About 65% of full-time students participate to some extent. Students are often unable to pursue their first choice option due to limited places. There is an additional social programme designed for residential students at Walford, which is open to all. There has been little interest in student union activity this year.

Leadership and management

What evidence is there to suggest the college's internal lesson observation process is sufficiently rigorous and comprehensive to provide a reliable assessment of the quality of teaching and learning?

- The internal lesson observation team involves 9 college managers supplemented by an external observer. The target is to observe all full-time and fractional teachers and about 25% of sessional teachers once each year, more often in the case of new teachers. With the change in the Ofsted lesson grading scale the college took a fresh approach in 2005/06 with the intention, well-supported by staff training, of linking lesson grading more strongly to the quality of learning taking place. The stronger focus on learning is apparent in the records of lesson observations, which provide thorough and helpful evaluations. An area for improvement is the extent to which records provide a clear

indication of how much progress students make during a lesson. In 2004/05, the observation profile indicated that 84% of teaching and learning were good or better, which does not sit comfortably with the college's success rate performance. In 2005/06 the proportion fell to 57% and the college believes this was largely to the greater focus on the learning taking place rather than the teaching performance. Further investigation is needed to test the reliability of this profile. Some factors, such as giving teachers at least 6 working days notice of the specific lesson to be observed, are likely to distort its reliability.

How effective is management action to improve underperforming courses?

- Identification of under-performing courses at college level, in the more serious cases, and curriculum area level is well-established through course review and self-assessment procedures. The likely causes and initiatives to address them are analysed at curriculum level and incorporated into action plans. The progress made against these plans is reviewed in termly quality team meetings. There are some clear examples of this approach working very effectively, for example in several land-based subject areas. But, equally, there are courses and subject areas which are proving difficult for the college to improve. Although extensive attention is paid to courses causing concern, the impact is not yet apparent in the college's overall success rates.

To what extent does the college comply with current child protection regulations and good practice?

- The college complies well with current regulations. It is well served by its previous practice, after taking over responsibility for the care of residential students on the merger with Walford College, of carrying out enhanced criminal record bureau (CRB) checks on a wide range of staff who come into contact with young people or vulnerable adults, including several governors. Designated staff and governors have undergone the appropriate training, all staff have attended child protection awareness training, and it is included in the induction programme for new staff. A central disclosure register is in place, but requires more retrospective work to complete the information required on the checking of qualifications. Further consideration may need to be given to the security of arrangements for checking compliance in relation to any use of temporary agency staff by the catering company.