

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Sussex Downs College
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

Success rates on long courses in 2005/06

- Around 70% of the college's full-time equivalent students are aged 16 to 18. The cohort of students age 16 to 18 is one of the largest in the country, with well over 4,000 students. Success rates for these students remained very high in 2005/06, far outstripping the national average for general further education colleges at level three, and in line with or above the national average at levels one and two, where there are fewer enrolments. On GCE A-level and AS courses, students' outcomes compare favourably with those of sixth form college national averages, an appropriate measure given the context of the college. The proportion of students achieving high grades (A or B) on GCE A-level courses is very impressive. The college recognises that one area for improvement is the retention rate on AS courses, which is below the sixth form college national average. Data comparing students' achievements with their prior attainment are not yet complete for 2005/06. However, value-added data for 2004/05 show that students made good progress.
- In 2004/05, overall success rates for adults were well below the national average. Preliminary indications are that there will be a significant improvement in 2005/06, although success rates will remain below the national average. Improved data management has contributed to more students' achievements being accurately recorded, particularly on national vocational qualification (NVQ) courses. There are clear signs of improvement in construction, health, public services and care, and retail and commercial enterprise. However, students' achievements on skills for life courses remain unsatisfactory. A concerted attempt to ensure that students on such courses are seeking, and entered for, qualifications is beginning to have an impact. Senior managers recognise the need to focus on improving retention rates on many courses, and are aware of the

need to emphasise throughout the college the link between the quality of teaching, attendance rates, and retention rates.

Success rates in work-based learning

- Over the last year there has been a significant improvement in success rates for apprentices. Current indications are that 60% of apprentices due to complete in 2005/06 will be successful, ahead of the college's own target of 50%. This represents considerable progress in several sector subject areas. For example, in motor vehicle training, success rates have risen from 32% in 2004/05 to 74% in 2005/06. Although there has been an improvement in success rates for advanced apprentices, these continue to be lower than those for apprentices. Learners on the college's entry to employment programme achieve well, with high progression rates.

Quality of education and training

The quality of teaching and learning

- The college has recently revised the internal lesson observation scheme, and early indications are that the new scheme is producing a realistic grade profile of the quality of teaching and learning. As teachers are given two weeks notice of the precise session that will be observed under the scheme, it may be less certain that observers are seeing normal practice. The college has improved the arrangements for reporting the quality of teaching and learning through the stages of the self-assessment process. This should lead to an improvement in the precise identification of strengths and areas for improvement in teaching in different parts of the college, in order to share good practice and reduce weaker practice more effectively. The college recognises that previous self-assessment reports have given insufficient detail on teaching and learning.

Reporting on "Every Child Matters" (ECM) outcomes

- Good progress has been made in integrating the ECM outcomes into the revised self-assessment process. Further work needs to be done in order to make judgements on the extent to which the college and its component parts are meeting the outcomes. The opportunity for support services, as well as curriculum areas, to report on their contribution to the ECM agenda is good practice.

The quality of provision in work-based learning

- As the improved success rates suggest, the college has made significant improvement to the provision for apprentices. All those involved in the programme are working closely together to ensure that learners are on the right programme, their progress is more carefully tracked, and they receive good support in all aspects of their programme to ensure that they successfully complete all the framework components.

Links with employers

- In line with its "Action for Business College" status, the college has made good progress in improving and extending links with employers, both for funded programmes and for commercial work. There is an increasingly good match between employers' needs and learners' needs. The college is polished and business-like in its dealings with employers. The centres of vocational excellence are responding well to their mission to engage with industry. For example, the college has recently won a substantial European Social Fund bid in connection with preparations for the 2012 Olympic Games.

The quality of franchised provision

- The college has taken action to improve the quality of franchised provision, both by reducing the number of providers, and by instigating more rigorous quality assurance arrangements with its franchise partners.

The development of community education

- The college has responded well to the changing funding arrangements for adult and community education, and provides a good range of courses to meet students' needs and interests. Partnership work aimed at widening participation is good, including in response to the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Leadership and management

Key developments in the college since the last annual assessment visit

- Leaders and managers have made good progress since the last visit. A focus on quality improvement has led to an upward trend in adult students' success rates, sustained high performance for students aged 16 to 18, and significant improvements in work-based learning outcomes.

The college continues to position itself as a key force in meeting the needs of individuals, communities and employers in East Sussex.

The management of provision for adult learners

- The management of adult provision has improved, although it is too soon to assess the full impact of recent changes. Lines of accountability are more defined, and there is greater clarity about where responsibilities lie. Senior managers recognise the challenge of developing a culture in which all middle managers responsible for the curriculum take the lead in ensuring that the progress of each cohort of students, of whatever age, is monitored rigorously, and those at risk of not successfully completing their courses are identified quickly and supported to attend and succeed.

Arrangements for grading in the self-assessment report

- The college recognises that the procedures for awarding grades to curriculum areas in the 2004/05 self-assessment process were insufficiently robust. The college did not give sufficient emphasis to students' achievements. Revised procedures are in place that should lead to more accurate grading. It is recognised that the complexity of the college causes difficulty in aggregating judgements from the different parts of the college to sector subject areas.

Progress in 14-19 developments

- The college has made good progress in developing the 14-19 curriculum to meet government expectations. It has a substantial and increasingly successful programme for pupils aged 14-16, and its relationship with the large number of partner schools are productive. The Wealden skills centre has been a success. The college is a key member of the partnership boards, led by the local authority, that are working on the 14-19 implementation plan. The college's work in this area has been recognised by its shortlisting for an Association of Colleges award, and was subsequently "highly commended" for its 14-19 development work.