

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Bexhill 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

What do college data for 2005/06 show about trends in students' performance?

- College data for 2005/06 show a continued improvement in success rates, largely due to an improvement in retention rates combined with sustained high pass rates. Despite this improvement, success rates in the college's core provision, advanced level courses for students aged 16 to 18, remain below the national average for sixth form colleges because retention rates are still significantly below the national average. Success rates vary significantly between curriculum areas, and between subjects, with outstanding success rates on some courses, but poor success rates on others. On level 2 courses, although more students completed their courses, pass rates fell and were low. Success rates were low for adult learners taking courses at level 3. Success rates are high on courses at level 1.
- Value-added data show that advanced level students make satisfactory progress in comparison with their prior attainment at GCSE, although this judgement disguises significant variations between subjects. There has been a slight decline in the college's performance on the advanced level performance system (ALPS) scale in 2005/06 compared to 2004/05. Managers recognise that for some years in the college too much weight has been given to pass rates in isolation, and not enough to the progress that students make, or to whether or not they complete their courses.

What do advanced subsidiary (AS) level data tell us about the performance of students in their first year of A levels? What are progression rates like from AS to A level?

- Students who complete their AS courses achieve pass rates in line with the national average, although too many students drop out of subjects

before the end of the course. Managers do not systematically analyse progression rates from AS-level courses to the full A-level. As a consequence, managers do not know whether variable progression rates between subjects are simply a reflection of students' choices, for example in reducing from four AS levels to three full A levels, or whether they are influenced to some degree by the quality of provision in different subjects.

What is being done to improve retention rates?

- Good progress has been made in taking action to improve retention rates. Since the last visit, the need to support students so that they complete their courses has been given a significantly higher profile. Stronger systems are being established to try to persuade students to finish their courses. For example, the college has made it much more difficult for students to drop from four AS levels to three during their first year. Pastoral support has been strengthened. Managers recognise the need to measure the success of these changes by rigorously monitoring in-year retention rates by department and course. Leaders and managers have further work to do in encouraging all staff to recognise that retention rates may be connected to the quality of provision, including students' experience of lessons, and to the support and encouragement they receive from subject teachers.

Have there been any improvements in framework achievements in work-based learning (WBL), particularly in care?

- Between 2004/05 and 2005/06 there was an improvement in the proportion of apprentices achieving the full framework, but success rates remain unsatisfactory at 18%, reflecting the very poor outcomes in previous years. Few apprentices complete their framework in the time expected. There has been some improvement in success rates for learners in health and care, but framework achievements remain very low indeed.

Quality of education and training

How effective are curriculum managers in making judgements on the quality of teaching and learning in order to seek improvement?

- The draft self-assessment report acknowledges that heads of department are not yet in a position to have a detailed knowledge of the

characteristics of teaching in their department in order to seek improvement. This is reflected in departmental summary self-assessment reports, which rarely identify features of pedagogy as either a strength or an area for improvement. The newly introduced quality review process has the potential to ensure that middle managers are much better informed about teaching in their departments. Evidence in the self-assessment report and elsewhere suggests that the college has good, well-qualified teachers. However, less evidence is provided to demonstrate that students learn effectively, both inside and outside the classroom. Value-added data suggest that in some subjects students are not learning as much, or as quickly, as they could to fulfil their potential. Low retention rates in some subjects may be related to the quality of students' experiences in the classroom. Further work needs to be done to check that the weaker performance in some subjects is not connected to the quality of teaching and learning, in its broadest sense.

What has been the impact of recent changes to the college's tutorial system?

- Recent changes to the tutorial system have the potential to improve the academic support offered to students. The introduction of more one-to-one interviews between tutors and tutees, and of weekly subject consultation sessions, has given students more opportunity to receive more personal support, both generic and subject-specific, to help them to succeed. Leaders recognise that further work needs to be done to ensure that tutors use the available data effectively to monitor students' performance and raise standards.

Has any progress been made in improving the consistency of WBL provision?

- Satisfactory progress has been made since the last visit in improving work-based learning provision. A potentially useful electronic tracking system has been introduced, although it is not yet fully operational and it is too early to judge its effectiveness and impact. All learners undertake initial assessment for skills for life at the start of their programme. However, the results of this assessment are not yet used effectively to ensure that all learners receive the individual support they need. Currently, no member of staff is assigned to assist with one-to-one support.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made since the last annual assessment visit in tackling the issues raised?

- The college has made good progress in the short time since the last annual assessment visit. Leaders and managers have acted quickly to improve quality assurance, and decisive steps are being taken to develop a clear college-wide strategy for improving retention rates. It is too early to judge whether managers will succeed in ensuring all staff consistently implement agreed policies to ensure that students complete all the courses for which they have enrolled. College leaders are faced with some interesting cultural challenges that need to be overcome to ensure that cross-college initiatives are subscribed to by all teachers. The draft self-assessment report for 2005/06 is significantly more incisive and realistic than its predecessor.

The college has recently implemented a new system of quality reviews. What impact are they having?

- Detailed quality reviews are now being carried out within each curriculum area by senior managers. The format for these reviews is appropriate, with a comprehensive lesson observation scheme and good use being made of students' views on the quality of provision. The reviews may benefit from further scrutiny of students' work in order to evaluate standards, and the quality and frequency of assessment. Early findings from the quality reviews indicate that a very high proportion of teaching is good or better. Leaders are aware of the need to ensure that this grade profile is accurate, and that the quality of teaching and learning is reconcilable with students' outcomes.

How much progress has been made in improving the use of data by middle managers?

- There is greater recognition of the need to use data as a tool to improve provision through careful monitoring of performance both at course and student level. Curriculum managers have access to up-to-date and reliable data. However, much work needs to be done to ensure that data are used to inform clear improvement plans. For example, departmental action plans tend to set vague targets, for example for improvement in

retention rates, rather than precise objectives based on a detailed analysis of the data.

What progress has the college made in implementing a strategy for the 14-19 phase?

- The college is closely involved with 14-19 developments in the area, and progress is good. The complexities of planning a coherent 14-19 phase are recognised, but progress is being made in joint working, for example, in developing proposals for the new vocational diplomas.

Have there been any improvements in the management of WBL?

- Management personnel and roles in WBL have recently been restructured. Staff are very committed to making further improvements. However, there is a lack of cohesion in the management of WBL provision. Analysis of the reasons for low achievement rates across all programmes is limited. Case loads for assessors are high in some instances. There is no overarching individual training plan that incorporates the results of initial assessment, national vocational qualification (NVQ) units, key skills and technical certificates.