

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Aylesbury College
Date of visit: 16 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

Impact of action taken to improve retention rates

- The college has implemented a variety of strategies to improve retention rates, but acknowledges that progress is slower than it would like. At the time of the visit, the college did not have an overall figure for retention as not all learners' outcomes were finalised. In a few areas where data were substantially complete, retention showed improvement from 2004/05. For example, on GCSE courses, retention improved from 68% to 80%, on GCE AS courses from 80% to 83% and on GCE A level courses from 89% to 95%.

College performance in 2005/06.

- Comparison with performance trends over three years is not possible at this stage as there is still a considerable number of results to process. Where data are available, results are variable. On GCSE courses, success rates have improved, largely as a result of increased retention rates. There was a small improvement in achievement rates, but overall pass rates at A*-C remain well below the national average. Pass rates at A*-C improved in both mathematics and English, and are now above the national average in mathematics but remain well below the national average in English. Pass rates on GCE AS courses declined by 6% to just below the national average. There is considerable variation in performance in different GCE AS subjects. On GCE A level courses, pass rates dropped by 3%. Whilst retention rates were good, pass rates were 7% below average. Achievements for learners aged 14 to 16 on certificated courses were good.

Impact of actions to improve key skills success rates

- Success rates in key skills rose from 14% in 2003/04 to 58% in 2005/06. All full-time learners aged 16-18 and some adults take key skills. The college uses initial assessment effectively to match key skills to learners' abilities and aspirations. It emphasises the importance of key skills through staff meetings and learners' inductions. Each department has a key skills expert to assist in developing relevant approaches and materials. Lesson observation records comment on assessment

opportunities in lessons and lesson plans. Learners start key skills early in their work-based learning programmes. The college integrates key skills into other assignment work, although this is still an area for further development.

Impact of actions to improve attendance

- Managers introduced an electronic registration system in 2005/06. Attendance rates improved by 3% over the previous year and were 79% in 2005/06. Teachers and tutors now have more current data, which enable closer monitoring of learners' attendance.

Development and use of value-added systems to measure learners' progress.

- In September 2006, the college introduced a value-added system for learners aged 16 to 18 on level 3 courses. It is intended to develop this further next year to include adult learners and level 2 courses. This system enables teachers and learners to record prior attainment and estimate predicted grades. It is used in tutorials to set targets for learners and monitor their progress against targets. Learners agree a minimum acceptable grade, and a higher, aspirational grade. It is too early to identify the impact of this on progress and achievement.

Learner destination and progression data

- Whilst managers collect data at course level, they have not yet developed a system for collating or analysing destination data at college level. Different course or curriculum teams analyse data differently. In some, they record destinations against learners' names, whilst other team leaders make a statistical analysis of destinations.

Quality of education and training

Improvements in teaching and learning

- The college has continued to observe a high number of lessons and the overall internal grade profile has improved in 2005/06, when observers judged 63% of lessons good or better, with only 2% inadequate. External partners help to validate the college's judgements. The college analyses observation outcomes by learner groups, level of course and by curriculum area. This information informs curriculum area self-assessment and improvement plans, and the annual staff development plan. The college has identified areas for further development in teaching and learning, including the need to extend and challenge more able learners.

Improvements in student support, especially for adults

- All learners, including adults, are now screened for additional support needs. Support is available to all, including part-time learners and those based in community venues. This is beginning to show clear benefits for some adults in

identifying long standing needs such as previously unrecognised dyslexia. The learning resource centre now combines resources for literacy and numeracy, key skills and skills for life, increasing the flexibility and range available to students. Recently the centre received Matrix accreditation and most staff are qualified or working towards a qualification in literacy and numeracy support. Specialist support staff assigned to departments help vocational tutors. Lesson observers check that learning support requirements are integrated into lesson plans ensuring effective use of classroom assistants. Learners are very positive about the benefits of the support they receive and college data show increased retention rates for those learners receiving support.

Tutorial arrangements

- All learners have a personal tutor. A structured scheme of work, clearly mapped against “Every Child Matters” themes and wider key skills, is shared on the virtual learning environment (VLE). Managers support and develop staff to deliver this programme through a revised observation system, peer review and mentoring for new staff and training. Connexions advisers provide good advice and guidance and contribute to curriculum vitae (CV) preparation and interview training. Other agencies are closely involved in supporting learners with learning difficulties of disabilities. Learners of all ages appreciate the encouragement they receive and understand the progress they are making. Progress reviews are regular and structured. Initial assessment is used to set targets at the first progress review. Subsequent reviews negotiate further targets informed by student progress, value-added and attendance data.

Leadership and management

Quality of curriculum area action plans and their effectiveness in addressing weakness identified, including the findings from lesson observations.

- The self-assessment process is rigorous and comprehensive. Curriculum area self-assessment reports (SARs) are internally moderated, and quality improvement plans are mostly closely linked to areas for improvement identified in the area SARs. Most of these include direct reference to the findings of lesson observations, in terms of areas of good practice to share and areas for development.

Discrepancies in data between the SAR and college performance report (CPR) in 2004/05 and actions taken by the college to improve the reliability of its data.

- The CPR for 2004/05 showed 676 more starts than the college ILR for the same year. Both data sources were consistent on numbers retained and numbers of achievements. A new management information system was introduced in 2004/05. Learner identification numbers were not transferred, resulting in some learners

being counted twice. The impact of the extra starts is on retention rates, with the CPR rate being 71% and the ILR rate 79%. The MIS manager is currently in dialogue with the LLSC to rectify these errors and produce an accurate account of performance for 2004/05. MIS data appear to be getting more accurate, and staff have greater confidence in the reliability of the data and in their understanding of it. Team leaders use data with course teams to monitor and evaluate course performance and identify areas for improvement. Data are now used regularly as a key part of the self-assessment process. The college is on track to complete its ILR by the end of November, which is considerably earlier than in previous years.

Progress on the use of data to monitor the performance of different groups and any actions arising from the findings.

- The college analyses the performance of different groups of learners by gender, ethnicity and disability. In some areas, females achieve better results than males, although the college does not currently know whether this is relative to prior attainment. The introduction of the value-added system will enable further analysis of any difference in these groups, relative to their prior attainment.

Recent data on staff turnover, recruitment and retention.

- Changes to part-time staff contracts have stabilised staffing in some areas, improving the continuity of part-time staff and their commitment to the college. Part-time staff are also paid to attend meetings and training and so are more involved in college life and development activity. There are still high numbers of new staff each year, and the college has strengthened its induction process and support for new staff to ensure they understand college processes and systems and are able to contribute effectively.

Impact of actions to improve success rates in work-based learning

- Overall success rates have improved significantly and are close to national averages. In the Early Years area, they are now high, with framework success rates rising from 22% in 2003/04 to 78% in 2005/06. Other areas are still below the national average but improvements in key skills have increased framework achievements. However, timely success rates remain low at 26%. Some problems with plumbing and electrical courses have been resolved but it is too early to see improvement in these areas.
- The management and co-ordination of work-based learning have improved. Whilst senior managers retain a strategic overview of the provision, the college has devolved operational responsibility to the curriculum teams. Assessors and academic staff work well together. Course restructuring has improved employers' involvement in learners' programmes and learners are often able to attend extra support sessions. The college has improved data management and plans to track course

elements although it is not clear how this interfaces with the college devised tracking system used in construction.

Any themes from the pre-visit analysis not explored during the visit:

- None

Any other observations from the visit not identified in the pre-visit analysis:

- The college has moved into newly built accommodation, with phase 2 due for completion in September 2007. This has greatly enhanced classroom and specialist facilities and enabled managers to reorganise support services in the college and extend employer engagement. Learners speak very highly of the positive impact of the new accommodation.