ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Burton College
Date of visit: 14 March 2007

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit (AAV). 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?

- College performance continued to improve, albeit modestly, in 2005/06. The college's overall and long course success rates both improved by one percentage point and are around the national average for general further education colleges. This suggests the objective of the college to soon be in the highest 10% of colleges on success rate performance is extremely ambitious. However, the college has recently re-structured in order to re-invigorate the process of raising standards. Success rates are improving in the majority of curriculum areas.

- Pass rates are high, especially for students aged 16 to 18. Retention rates are broadly average. They show an improving trend for 16 to 18 year olds, but declined for adult students in 2005/06, significantly so at level 1, due largely to the poor performance of a new, community-based information technology centre. Value added data suggest that, overall, students achieve in line with expectations.

- Among students aged 16 to 18, those with Pakistani heritage have not achieved as well as other ethnic groups for several years. The college has recognised this and set broad targets for improvement. The gap in achievement between male and female students is larger than it is nationally. For students aged 16 to 18, actions taken by the college are narrowing the gap.

What judgements can be made about achievements by work-based learners? How successfully is the college addressing those areas of work-based learning (WBL) with lower success rates?

- The overall success rate for framework achievements increased in 2005/06 to 64%, well above the national average of 49%. Success rates are particularly high in engineering, but are significantly below national

averages for advanced apprenticeships in health and social care and in construction. In the past year the college has focussed on improving timely achievement. Most curriculum areas have set realistic completion dates which are closely monitored. The college has improved the electronic tracking of learners. Regular, bi-monthly work-based learning management meetings continue to oversee learners' achievement well. Timely success rates have risen steadily in line with national averages.

- The college is sharing good practice across work-based provision more systematically. The engineering curriculum area in particular has been used as a model for the delivery of key skills and engagement with employers. The work-based learning team is aware of the need to develop better methods for gauging employer perceptions.

Quality of education and training

From evidence available, how well do teachers plan lessons to meet the needs of students across the ability range?

- Sampling of schemes of work and lesson plans indicates that courses and lessons are, typically, well planned well and provide sufficient detail to enable lessons to be covered effectively. Valuable contextual information is compiled, including students preferred learning styles and learning support needs, and can usefully inform lesson planning and management. The standard lesson plan template requires teachers to consider how differentiation might be used effectively. Plans sampled show variability in the extent to which differentiation is planned into teaching and learning activities; however, college managers believe that this understates the extent to which differentiation is an embedded characteristic of lessons.

- Several aspects of lesson planning and management are not currently made explicit within schemes of work or lesson plans. For example, how learning support is to be deployed and how students' preferred learning styles influence the range of learning activities selected. Learning objectives for each lesson are clearly stated in schemes of work and students confirm these are shared at the start of lessons. These objectives tend not to be differentiated.

- From internal lesson observations the college produces a useful summary specific staff development needs for each faculty. The two advanced practitioners in each faculty have responsibility for acting on these. The college has also developed an extremely comprehensive database of areas for improvement for each teacher derived from the lesson observation process and this informs individual appraisal and the staff development programme.

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

- The college leads on two increasing flexibility partnerships encompassing 11 high schools. There are currently 380 students in Years 10 and 11 attending college courses. The provision includes NVQs, vocational GCSEs, BTEC qualifications and a small young apprenticeship programme in engineering. The range of subjects is expanding with an addition of four curriculum areas made available in the past year and a further four planned for next year.

- Success rates for students aged 14 to 16 have steadily improved over the last few years and are good, at 74% overall in 2006. Progression rates for these students are good at 80% for the Staffordshire area and 74% for the Derbyshire area in 2006. In the past year the College has played a key role in developing the collaborative bid for the new specialised diplomas.

How successful are key skills in the college?

- In the last year the college has made changes to the management and co-ordination of key skills. A new manager for functional skills has responsibility for coordinating them. Key skills are also now managed within specific curriculum areas rather than the sixth form centre.

- The overall key skills success rate declined from 52% in 2005 to 45% in 2006. However, success rates are good at level 1 in communications, application of number and information technology (IT) and at level 2 in communications and IT. All key skills at level 1 and 2 are above regional averages. Success rates at level 3 for communications and IT are low at 14% and 17% respectively. The college is aware of the need for better communication of the demands and benefits of key skills to learners and the need for better sharing of good practice in key skills.

Does the college provide a varied and stimulating cross-college enrichment programme for full-time students?

- The college enrichment programme provides students with a small but varied range of opportunities to spend time in activities which provide some contrast to their courses of study. These 'electives' are scheduled on Wednesday afternoons and many courses are now timetabled at the same time, which prevents many students from participating. The college recognises the need to complete a fundamental review of its approach as only about 10% of full-time students aged 16 to 18 participate in the programme.

- The student experience is enriched more widely by a good range of guidance activities for careers and progression and by promotion of aspects of the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda in tutorials. Curriculum

enhancement is good in many areas, with students enjoying course-related visits, including residentials, and expert contributions to their courses. However, work experience opportunities are not widely available.

Leadership and management

Does the college have good procedures for obtaining feedback from students? Do students' views influence college developments appropriately?

- The college has comprehensive and robust procedures for gathering feedback from students on full- and part-time courses. Students are surveyed at induction, during their programme and on exit. Information is collated and analysed at course, curriculum area and whole college levels. Curriculum areas also run student focus groups, which learners find particularly useful. Curriculum areas report and action plan key issues arising from these processes within their self-assessment reports. However, there are no formal mechanisms for gauging feedback from work-based learners, adult and community learners or students aged 14 to 16 and the college is in the process of developing comparable methods for these groups. The college has a student council and an appropriate course representative system. Students are adequately engaged on all the colleges' formal committees, including the governing body and academic committees. Students generally feel that the college is responsive to their needs and the feedback they provide, but some are not sufficiently aware of the representative structures.

How effective is the college's self assessment against the ECM agenda?

- The current SAR incorporates the college's second attempt to evaluate performance against the five ECM themes, which have been graded for the first time. The college recognises that, at this stage, it has provided more of an evaluation of those college policies, procedures and actions perceived to promote the ECM themes, rather than the outcomes for young students. It now intends to explore a broader range of evidence indicators to better reflect these outcomes and consider how the impact of the college's promotion of the ECM themes on young people might be measured.

To what extent does the college comply with recent safeguarding regulations and good practice?

- Since the last AAV, the college has taken action to strengthen its safeguarding arrangements. Provision has been made for a second designated officer to provide cover for the first; governors have received

the training planned for them and all college staff are in the process of completing more extensive, on-line child protection training which includes guidance on identifying signs of abuse. A single, central record of staff checks is in place, but needs to be extended to record the checks made on identity and all qualifications required for each post.

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

- The 2005/06 SAR shows lower grades for several curriculum areas than the previous year. Managers indicate that this is due to the college taking a particularly robust approach to grading curriculum area performance this year as part of the process of promoting higher standards. However, the AAV did not explore this further.

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

- The college has extended its procedures for monitoring curriculum area performance. The termly curriculum reviews have been strengthened and are now supplemented by a system of faculty health checks. This has increased the rigour and frequency with which performance is monitored and keeps senior managers alert to when and where intervention may be needed.