

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Taunton's
Date of visit: 11 January 2007

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 the results for 2005/06 show, and where is the main movement? Have pass rates on AS courses improved?

- Overall, achievements and standards are satisfactory. Success rates on all long courses for all students rose in 2005/06 by two percentage points to 70%, which remains below the national average for sixth form colleges. This improvement is largely attributable to the high success rates on vocational courses at all 3 levels and to the high success rates achieved by the small number of adult students.
- For students aged 16 to 18 on long courses (the large majority), at level 1 success rates declined one percentage point and are still around the national average; at level 2 they rose seven points to well above the national average; at level 3 they declined two percentage points and remain below the national average.
- For adult students on long courses, at level 2 success rates rose five percentage points and are well above the national average; at level 3 they rose fourteen points and are also well above the national average. There are now negligible numbers of adult students studying at level 1.
- Success rates at A level (almost all by students aged 16 to 18) rose two percentage points but at AS all three measures (retention, pass and success rates) saw a further decline from levels that were already well below the national averages. The college acknowledges that the AS results in particular are disappointing. However, it is notable that the average General Certificate of Education (GCSE) points score of students taking AS courses at the

college in 2005/06 fell further: over a quarter of students entered the college with an average points score of less than 4.7 per student, compared with some 10% nationally who undertake AS courses in colleges with that low level of prior attainment on entry. Moreover, in some key subjects (for example, English language and literature combined, information and communications technology, sport studies) significant improvements have been made to AS pass and success rates. These subjects were the foci of intensive supportive scrutiny in 2005/06, and so demonstrate the localised success of some of the college's specific strategies to improve AS performance.

What do value added and distance travelled measures show about the relative progress made by students?

- The value-added score as measured by the ALPS system to which the college subscribes showed an improved score for A levels but a worse one for AS courses. Six AS subjects show persistently low value-added scores over several years. The low AS score is compounded by the lower pass rates in 2005/06, for which students are disproportionately penalised on the numerical scale. The college has, additionally, re-subscribed to the ALIS system in 2006/07, and is already using this methodology internally to set minimum target grades and create 'chances graphs' for current AS and A level students. These are new strategies designed to improve AS success rates. The college now analyses students' prior attainment and examines statistical predictors of likely success in particular subjects in a thorough and sophisticated way, and this analysis informs the extensive pre-enrolment advice and guidance conducted with students.

What do attendance rates show, and how does the college respond to poor or irregular attendance?

- Attendance has improved on long level 1 courses to 86% (2005/06 figure), and on long level 3 courses it has remained at 88%: these rates are at or above average. On long level 2 courses attendance has remained static at 80%. Means and actions to monitor and tackle poor or irregular attendance are good.

Quality of education and training

How successfully have planned new curriculum developments for 2006/07 been introduced?

- New vocational courses were offered for 2006/07 at level 3, in response to demand, and these have all recruited successfully and are running: these courses include a national award in forensic science and national diplomas in performing arts and popular music (this latter was specifically offered in 2004/05 to attract new students who were not engaged in structured employment, further education or training, and in 2006/07 the course doubled its new intake). The college also offered direct teaching support for a first diploma in performing arts run in a local school. Some new entry-level courses were offered for students not yet ready to undertake a course at level 1. Basic skills courses for adults and courses in English for speakers of other languages were discontinued from September 2006. Some persistently under-performing courses were discontinued from September 2006, including general studies A level. The persistently under-performing AS in critical thinking is going to be restricted to A level academy students (those who enter the college with 6 or more GCSEs at grade B or better) from 2007/08.

Leadership and management

The college was last inspected in February 2005. How far has the college moved, in two years, in addressing the areas identified in need of improvement at this inspection? What progress has been made with the rebuilding plans?

- The college has achieved a greater degree of financial stability and has a sound framework for managing and controlling risk as it pursues its ambitious accommodation plans. It is now categorised as being in financial band A. A major restructuring of staff has streamlined and redefined all management roles and the college has also redefined its mission and its position within the further education sector in the city.

- The college's estate remains in need of significant investment. Centred in an old grammar school building, it does not lend itself to efficient modification and is expensive to maintain. There are extensive plans to rebuild a new college. A feasibility study has just been completed, with a view to beginning a three year building programme in 2007. The total cost is now estimated at £25 million, and the college is currently in discussion with the Learning and Skills Council about a bid for approximately 85% of this. It expects to submit the application by April 2007. The rest of the cost (£3.5 million) would be met by a loan. Several prudent interim arrangements have been made to address particular areas of concern: there is more curriculum cohesion for the 12 departments who all now have a clear physical identity which includes a staff workroom to enable the better sharing of ideas and common experience. Some departments have been able to create student study zones in these areas. The library and learning resources centre have been expanded and improved. Student services are now all more centrally grouped in the one area.
- The college's own programme for the graded observation of teaching and learning was significantly revised in 2005/06. It is considerably more rigorous and realistic than in 2003/04 and has an effective level of moderation through the use of trained senior/middle managers. This dimension of the programme is known as the internal quality review (IQR). Records from this are particularly good: analysis is sharp, direct and pragmatic and leads to specific plans for staff training. Effective practice is highlighted for dissemination and instances of dull or ineffective teaching and classroom management are clearly challenged and discussed. The programme for 2005/06 revealed that a sizeable proportion of teaching is still no better than satisfactory, and that this judgement applies to particular curriculum areas. A staff conference on teaching and learning has led to five strategies being identified to improve teaching, learning and so results for students. Consequently, early identification of students at risk, individual target setting and monitoring and a cross-college focus on improving assessment for learning during lessons have all been pursued vigorously in the last year. More students in the lowest band of average points scores at GCSE are now doing vocational courses at level 3 rather than AS courses. More teaching time and more learning support has been allocated to AS courses. Meetings of heads of departments focus primarily on issues related to teaching and learning. A homework audit has been carried out by

the Principal and other senior managers and has revealed that there is wide discrepancy in the extent to which teachers assess learning and follow that up with regular and practical guidance for students. These findings are being pursued in current staff development.

- The above actions are appropriate and overdue. Hitherto, students have not routinely been set minimum target grades on the basis of analysis of their prior attainment and national 'chances graphs' intelligence. Some teachers are still learning how to use such measures efficiently. All these actions are being embraced by the college as a whole under the leadership of the new Principal who is determined to reposition the college as a centre of excellence for level 3 study in Southampton. Pass rates for AS courses, however, have not yet improved: in fact, they declined a further four percentage points in 2005/06 and are now some 12 points below the national average for sixth form colleges. The self-assessment report for 2005/06 is shrewd and insightful, and recognises the centrality of assessment for learning in enabling students of all abilities, but especially those of more modest ability, to reach their full potential. It does, however, over-estimate the overall quality of students' achievements and standards as good rather than the more accurate judgement of satisfactory.
- The college judges its capacity to improve has strengthened and is now good. This is an accurate assessment on the evidence of the points presented above. Additionally, there is evidence that the college is beginning to attract more students of above-average prior attainment and persuading them not to travel beyond the city boundary for their further education: the average GCSE points score of the 2006/07 cohort is higher than in 2005/06; the number of students qualified on entry to the college to become members of the sixth form academy (for which they need to have gained 6 GCSEs at grade B or better) has grown by 50% in 2006/07 to 150; enrolments of students aged 16 to 18 have grown this year by 13%, from 1200 (by full-time equivalent calculation) to 1360 – demonstrating the positive part the college is playing in raising the proportion of young people in Southampton who stay on in education or training at age 16 (this has risen 6 percentage points in 2006/07 to 78%).

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

- N/A

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

Management information

- A key weakness in the self-assessment report refers to the right kind of data still not being available to all stakeholders in the right format. The college has made considerable progress already in 2006/07 to create systems that will enable all core data about a student (attendance and punctuality, target grades and progress against them, half-termly assessments, attitudes to work, schedule of work completed on time) to be available easily and promptly to all who need to see them. To date, managers, tutors and teachers can gain access to this information, but parents and students can not. There is further work to be done to enable this to happen.