

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS



Name of College: Bolton Sixth Form College
Date of visit: 9 May 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

Learners' achievements 05/06

- The overall success rate for long courses increased in 2005/06 to 79%. The majority of students are on level 3 courses and here success rates for AS courses increased by 8% and A level courses by 5%. The only area where success rates declined was on advanced vocational courses, where pass rates were very high but retention rates were low. Value added analysis shows that students make very good progress when compared to their qualifications on entry. On AS courses the value added ALPs grade improved from a grade 7 in 2002 to a grade 2 in 2006, which is classified as outstanding. On A level courses the value added ALPs grade improved from a 6 in 2005 to a 4 in 2006, which is classified as very good.
- Success rates on both level 1 and 2 courses increased in 2005/06. For GCSE courses success rates improved by 8% and on level 1 courses success rates recovered from a dip in 2004/05, increasing by more than 10%.

At the last annual assessment visit it was noted that strategies to improve retention were beginning to have a positive effect. What was the impact over the whole of 2005/06 and what progress has been made in 2006/07, particularly in relation to the introduction of learning mentors focussing on learners perceived as at high risk of leaving the college?

- Retention rates improved overall from 2004/05 to 2005/06. At level 3, where there are most students, retention increased for both AS and A level courses. However retention on advanced vocational courses dropped by 15%. Retention data to date for 2006/07 show the upward overall trend in retention has continued and strengthened. Monthly comparisons show retention currently 4% higher than this time last year. The introduction of learning mentors has been well received in the college. Initial indications are that learning mentors have had a positive impact on students' experiences, their attendance and retention.

At the last annual assessment visit it was noted that there had been poor performance in a minority of subject areas. What progress has been made here?

- At AS level those areas where there was underperformance in 2004/05 have improved. There are now no subjects where students achieve less than expected based on their attainment on entry. On A level courses there are still some areas where students achieve less well than expected, but some of these subjects have very small numbers and there are significant variations year on year. Where there are current issues within a subject or course, for example retention issues on AVCE courses, specific action plans are in place to bring about improvement.

Quality of education and training

In the last inspection it was stated that 'the college offers a wide range of courses from foundation level to level 3 which meet effectively the needs of most of the students.' What strategies are being used to ensure the curriculum offer continues to meet needs?

- There is currently a range of qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 3, with the majority of the offer at level 3. The college works hard at developing pathways so that students can progress from one level to the next and, potentially, from level 1 through to higher education. Within curriculum areas students are able to opt for different qualifications, for example BTEC or applied A level, so they can pick that which best meets their needs. The college analyses the curriculum offer thoroughly in two main ways; by looking externally to see what new initiatives are being developed and how they might benefit their students, and by analysing their existing offer to see where there are gaps or a need for development. In addition student feedback is used to judge their satisfaction with the courses on offer. At present the college is involved in a number of new developments including specialised diplomas and the international baccalaureate.

The quality of student support was judged satisfactory in the last inspection, however in the 2005/06 SAR support and guidance are described as 'strong'. What actions have been taken by the college to strengthen this area and how is the college monitoring and evaluating the impact of strategies on the learner experience?

- There is a strong focus on support in the college and, in particular, on meeting the needs of the diverse student population. Learning mentors have had a key role in improving the support available for groups of students considered at risk. The every child matters (ECM) agenda has been embedded throughout the college with curriculum audits and each site having a designated child protection/ECM officer. There are extensive links with local feeder schools to support a smooth transition into the college, with appropriate support structures put in place for those that need them. Great emphasis is placed on ensuring students are placed on the courses that best suit their needs. The consistency of tutorial delivery has been improved and there is a focus on the sharing of good practice.
- There are regular audits of provision and a culture of rigorous self-assessment is being developed. A range of indicators are used to judge performance in this area and show positive outcomes, for example, improving attendance and retention and positive feedback from student surveys.

Leadership and management

In considering the summary of self assessment grades in the 2005/06 SAR, curriculum grades range from satisfactory to outstanding. What strategies are being employed to assist areas in moving up and in supporting those already with top grades in maintaining them?

- All departments produce action plans to deal with specific issues in their areas and these are regularly monitored and reviewed, both within departments and in meetings with college managers. In addition there are college wide strategies, such as the use of learning mentors and the focus on skills for life, which have been of benefit to departments in improving provision. A key theme has been the sharing of good practice, with the production of a newsletter for spreading excellent practice in teaching and learning. In addition there is support for staff where individual issues have been identified. There is an increasing use of information and learning technology and other strategies to increase student participation and enjoyment of sessions.

In the 2005/06 SAR, operation on two sites and managing the transition to new sites were given as particular challenges to the

management. What strategies are being employed to meet these challenges and how is their effectiveness monitored?

- To ensure smooth working across the two sites the timetable is well structured to allow time for movement between sites for both staff and students. There are effective communication systems, with electronic communication being very helpful. Departments work well together and meet regularly to make sure staff from different sites do not feel isolated. Senior managers split their time across the sites and monitor provision regularly to make sure they pick up on any issues. Some minor issues have been picked up, for example from student surveys, and these have been dealt with effectively. There is a strong focus on consistency across the two sites.
- At present the transition to the new site is having limited impact on staff and students, with most effect being on the senior management team. On the existing South Campus provision has been moved to a different building, temporarily before the move to the new campus in August 2008, but this has been well managed and so has had very little negative impact.

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

- Plans to move to the new South Campus are progressing well. Plans to move to the town-centre site are at an earlier stage of development.