

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: West Herts College
Date of visit: 3 July 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

Have the improvements in success rates on level 1 courses for adults and the retention of 16-18 learners been maintained?

- Success rates have continued to improve for 16-18 and adult learners in 2005/06 and are well above the 2004/05 national averages. College data indicate further improvements in retention across all levels for 16-18 and adult learners, 3% and 5% respectively. The college achievement strategy has sharpened the focus on progress reviews for learners where targets for achievement and challenge are regularly monitored. The quality review process takes place five times each year and is used well to underpin course reviews. The focus is to monitor course targets and to identify where early intervention is required by management. A small number of programmes have been discontinued due to persistently poor success rates.

Why did the pass rates for level 2 short and very short qualifications drop from 89% in 2004/05 to 79% in 2005/06? Have there been improvements in 2006/07?

- There is now only a small amount of additional provision on learners' main programmes. A food safety programme offered in 2004/05 with high success rates was not offered in 2005/06, which impacted negatively on the overall success rate for very short programmes in this year.

From the last annual assessment visit (AAV) well developed plans to use value-added data from the learner achievement tracker (LAT) for performance management and target setting for learners were noted. How are data used and what impact is there on improving achievement and standards further?

- Value-added and distance travelled measures are used across the college effectively for all full-time learners across all levels. Learner targets and challenge scores are used within learners' progress reviews at least three times each year. The progress of adult learners' on non-accredited programmes is monitored effectively. College data indicate positive value added and distance travelled on most programmes.

From the last AAV it was noted that success rates on key skills qualifications for learners other than work based learning were still low. Have the improvements noted in 2005/06 been maintained and what improvements been made in the pass rates of level 3 communication?

The last AAV noted that the college had set itself a target of achievement for key skills of 60%. To what extent has this target been met?

- The college is monitoring progress against its targets very closely. The number of learners taking key skills awards has increased significantly in both literacy and numeracy. Overall success rates for key skills have increased from 50% in 2005/06 to 53% in 2006/07, and within some curriculum areas, success rates have improved significantly.
- The rate of improvement in key skills outside work based learning is not yet consistent across the college. Provisional college data for key skills for 2006/07 show success rates for numeracy have increased from 59% in 2005/06 to 71%. The improvement in success rates for communications has not been so great. In particular, although success rates at communications at level 3 have shown a marked improvement, from 9% in 2005/06 to 21% in 2006/07, with twice as many learners taking the qualification (401 learners in 2006/07 compared with 201 in 2005/06), success rates remain significantly below national rates.

Quality of education and training

The self assessment report (SAR) notes 2005/06 was spent focusing on new (228) and underperforming staff which resulted in a higher number of satisfactory grades than expected because many existing good or better teachers were not observed. To what extent has the profile of good or better grades for teaching and learning improved in 2006/07?

- The majority of staff (94%) have been observed in 2006/07. Inadequate teaching and learning accounts for only 1% of provision. In 2006/07 67% of observed sessions were judged good or better, with 21% graded as outstanding, against college targets of 66% and 20% respectively. Outstanding teachers are recognised and rewarded. They contribute to staff development events where good practice is shared across college. The use of senior teaching and learning practitioners to improve practice is well embedded across the college. Practitioners are also used effectively within intervention programmes in areas of the college where performance issues have been identified. Learner satisfaction is generally high; in 2006/07 93% report that teaching is good, 81% that lessons are interesting and almost 90% would recommend their course and the college to a friend.

The last AAV noted that the teaching of key skills was variable with curriculum areas at different stages of their development. What improvements have taken place and can be evidenced?

- At present, the organisation and quality of key skills teaching varies across the college. Some vocational areas such as engineering, hairdressing and construction now have specialist tutors attached to them; others use vocational tutors who have been trained to deliver key skills. In other areas such as A levels, key skills are delivered as discrete sessions within a full time programme.
- The college recognises that some issues remain around particular aspects of teaching. These include the confidence, skills, detailed knowledge and sense of ownership of some staff delivering key skills. The college has identified the need for additional training and support for some non-specialist staff delivering key skills, and has strengthened the college team through the appointment of a senior practitioner with specialist skills in literacy. It is also planning to appoint a number of specialist internal verifiers to observe, monitor and support key skills delivery by non-specialists in targeted areas of the curriculum.

- Attendance at key skills sessions is also recognised as an issue for some learners, for example on A level programmes, where some learners may not recognise the relevance of the level 3 award. The college is taking steps to address this but it is too early to assess the impact.

The last AAV noted that not all teaching and learning records comment sufficiently on learning, and on the learning of particular individuals or groups. To what extent has this been addressed?

The last AAV identified the use of information learning technology (ILT) and differentiated teaching and learning as areas for action. To what extent have these areas been addressed?

- Lesson observation records now enable a more detailed and comprehensive analysis of each session to be undertaken. The data will be used from July 2007 to target and inform future planning and development activities. Records are now focussed more strongly on learning and record the use of ILT well. Key strengths and areas for improvement are captured effectively.
- The majority of teaching and learning materials are now available on the college's virtual learning environment (Moodle). The impact of the introduction of ILT facilitators across the college is to be evaluated in 2007/08, but early indications are that these staff are having a positive impact on enhancing teachers' skills in the use of ILT. Teachers have access to 'smart rooms' where the use of smartboards and banks of laptops can be used to motivate and stimulate learning.

The SAR identifies the need to ensure adult progression routes to full level 2 qualifications. To what extent has this provision been introduced?

- The numbers of adult learners on full level 2 programmes increased in 2006/07 from 302 to 448 learners, mainly on electrical installation and hair and beauty NVO programmes. A further expansion in learner numbers and provision is planned for 2007/08, to include provision in retail and customer services, administration and hospitality and catering.

Leadership and management

To what extent have areas for improvements identified in the SAR in the quality of provision in the learning centre service been addressed?

- The college has made a number of improvements to its learning centres, in response to identified learner needs. For 2006/07, it introduced additional support for learners through a new research and study skills programme, which gives specific support to meet individual needs in areas such as assignment writing and research. Learners are made aware of this facility through their tutors. This provision has been very well received by learners across most programme areas, and take up has been substantial with more than 2,500 learners attending sessions. Early indications are that the additional support is having an impact on the retention of students who may otherwise have left their programmes.
- The college is continuing to make other improvements, in the context of wider developments to its campuses. For example, the new Kings Langley skills centre has a learning resource centre, which is open through until the evening. The college has also increased the number of silent study rooms across the college, in response to learner demand, and booking systems for the use of computers by learners have been substantially revised. Learning resource staff liaise routinely with individual course teams and schools to identify additional resources needed.

The last AAV notes the bringing together of key skills, basic skills and foundation skills under the leadership of a single manager, with additional staff to support learners. To what extent have these changes been effective in improving quality further?

- The structural and staffing changes made by the college and reported on at the last annual assessment visit, together with a number of other measures, continue to impact positively on success rates for key skills. Initial assessment is now being used in a more focused and effective way to identify individual learner needs in literacy and numeracy, and to guide targeted support. On-line assessment is used extensively across college and is available on the college intranet. The college has taken additional measures such as disseminating good practice through staff training and supporting and encouraging staff to take specialist awards in Skills for Life at levels 3 and 4.

The SAR notes that systems to evaluate the improvements made under the Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes are underdeveloped. To what extent has this been addressed?

- The college has adopted a strategic approach through the mapping of existing activities across the college which cover the ECM outcomes. College leadership has a clear view of what is happening across the college. Work is underway to expand enrichment activities within schools and cross-college to address coverage. ECM outcomes are also identified through the teaching and learning observations and recorded as areas of strength or improvement. Coverage is also evaluated through the course review process. Child protection procedures are in place and referrals are closely monitored. Learners identified as 'at risk' from underperforming are closely monitored and supported. The retention of these learners is tracked closely. The college has engaged the parents and carers of 'at risk' learners proactively.

The SAR identifies the further embedding, monitoring and evaluation of equality and diversity as an area for improvement. To what extent have improvements been made and what impact are improvements having on teaching and learning?

- All key performance indicators are now analysed by ethnicity, gender, age, disability and also through deprivation indices where appropriate. This has enabled the college to identify areas of underperformance and target improvement strategies to specific groups of learners. The staff and learners' monitoring groups suggest areas for improvement. Learners' views have also been sought in the design and development of the college estate. College-wide targets are evaluated through the school review process five times each year. College data show that the number of unknowns in disability and ethnicity data has decreased compared with 2005/06.

The last AAV noted that the college has produced a well thought through employer strategy and the SAR lists improved links with employers as an area for improvement. To what extent has the college been successful in improving links with employers?

- The college continues to regard employer engagement as one of its key priorities. The substantial work undertaken by the college to address employer engagement and work placements, reported at the last monitoring visit, is continuing to strengthen the position of the college in this area. The college's detailed strategy is now being implemented

progressively and monitored closely, with a clear lead from the principal and senior managers.

- The college has improved and consolidated its close links with a wide range of employers and with the local Chamber of Commerce. It has strengthened its team of training consultants, and has further developed its internal systems to give clear and coherent access for employers. For example, a single employer contacts database is now in place, and employer provision is marketed under a college brand of 'Learning Works'. Staff have engaged enthusiastically in these developments.
- The college has been successful in meeting its targets under Train to Gain, with 90 learners on programme since March 2006, and all learners requiring work placements have been placed with employers successfully. The college has also established itself successfully as a provider of work placements, especially for more vulnerable learners on foundation programmes who require a particularly secure environment.

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:

- From analysis of learner questionnaire responses in 2006/07, 22% of learners reported that they did not receive quick feedback on assessed work.
- Of the 684 parents and carers who responded to a 'how are we doing?' questionnaire in November 2006, overall satisfaction was very high.