

## ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: John Ruskin College  
Date of visit: 14 June 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 are the prospects for improvement in success rates in 2006/07, particularly on level 3 courses? What do in-year retention rates show? What progress has been made in improving success rates on AS courses?

- In 2005/06, success rates were significantly below the national average on long courses at level 3, at 66% compared to a national average of 82% in the previous year. Students' outcomes were particularly weak on advanced subsidiary (AS) courses; in several subjects, examination results were unsatisfactory. Part of the explanation for the weak performance of full-time students at level 3 is the relatively low qualifications on entry held by students in comparison to other similar colleges. College managers believe that there will be an improvement in success rates in 2006/07. This belief is based upon an improvement in retention rates over the last two years, and improved examination results in the January modules in many subjects at AS level. The college has also raised slightly the entrance requirements for AS level courses. Managers recognise that, although good data are easily available, they are not always used effectively to analyse trends in students' outcomes in order to identify quickly what needs to be done to improve performance.
- In recognition that action needs to be taken to improve performance at AS level, the college is instituting an "A+" programme from September 2007, designed to give students more support and monitor their progress more rigorously.

What do value-added data show about the progress students make?

- Value-added data show that, overall, students make satisfactory progress in comparison with their prior attainment. However, the data also show that there are too many subjects in which students' progress is weak.

The college uses the advanced level performance system (ALPS) to gauge its effectiveness in helping students to make good progress. The overall ALPS figure places the college in the bottom 40% of participating colleges on the value-added index. In several subjects, according to the ALPS index the progress that students make is unsatisfactory.

## Quality of education and training

What evidence can the college provide of improvements in teaching and learning? How effective is the college's internal lesson observation scheme in identifying areas for improvement in teaching and learning?

- The college has made a concerted effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning since its last inspection, and evidence from the college's internal lesson observations scheme shows a significant improvement in the proportion of good or better lessons, and a reduction in the amount of inadequate lessons, over the last six months. The lesson observation scheme has been made more rigorous, and the moderation of grades awarded is thorough. Much training has been provided to improve classroom practice, and this has been effective. For example, weekly sessions are held focused on sharing good practice, and these are reasonably well attended. The recently introduced teaching and learning mentors are already beginning to have an impact in generating discussions about classroom practice, and in supporting colleagues who need, or wish, to develop their classroom skills.

## Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the rigour and consistency of self-evaluation across the college?

- College leaders have been aware of the need to ensure that self-assessment is more rigorous and consistent across the college. In response to this, a more thorough process for reviewing courses has been implemented. The quality of provision on each course is reviewed frequently through scrutiny of data on students' progress and other indicators, and action plans are drawn up to tackle areas for improvement. Although reliable data are available and used to inform self-assessment, the judgements made on the basis of that data are not

always supported by the evidence. As a consequence, it is likely that the judgement grades awarded to a number of courses are overly generous.

- The whole college self-assessment report is concise and evaluative, and does not shirk from being self-critical. However, insufficient weight is attached to the significant weakness of low student success rates on long courses at level 3.

How confident are curriculum managers in the analysis and use of data to bring about improvements?

- Curriculum managers have access to reliable and timely data on most aspects of students' performance. Increasingly, they understand the importance that is attached to success rates, although in self-assessment undue credit is occasionally given to high pass rates on a course on which retention rates are low, or vice versa. Similarly, insufficient weight is sometimes given to the results of value-added analysis on advanced level courses.
- Further work needs to be done by managers to make the best use of data to bring about improvements. Both in curriculum areas and across the college, the detailed information available on students is not always analysed and used to best effect to bring about rapid improvement. For example, although individual students' progress against their target minimum grades is tracked, neither curriculum managers nor senior managers make sufficient use of these data to analyse progress by group or subject throughout the year. Similarly, data on retention rates are not routinely broken down into their component parts in order to identify precise areas of weakness. Data are used more effectively to analyse students' outcomes retrospectively than during their time at college.

In view of the grade profile at the last inspection, what evidence does the college have to support its view that its capacity to improve is good?

- At its last inspection in March 2006, the college was judged to be satisfactory in all aspects of its work. The current self-assessment report judges the college's capacity to improve to be good. The evidence for this judgement is based on the recent improvements to teaching and learning, more careful enrolments on to courses at the right level, changes to the tutorial programme and the introduction of the "A+" programme, and evidence of a culture change in the college that is improving levels of

accountability for students' performance. Senior leaders recognise that final success rate data for 2006/07 will provide critical evidence of whether the capacity to improve judgement is sustainable.

In the action plan attached to the self-assessment report, there is a reference to the need "to address the college's financial situation". What is the college's current financial situation?

- Despite a significant shortfall in recruitment of full time students aged 16-18 in 2006/07, the college remains financially stable. Appropriate steps have been taken to make the necessary savings. Senior leaders have put in place a range of strategies to increase the recruitment of full-time students.