

Bolton Sixth Form College

Inspection report

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. Bolton Sixth Form College has two campuses, one in the north and one in the south of the borough. A new purpose built south campus, costing £14 million, will replace the present one in September 2008. Planning continues for the replacement of the northern site with a purpose built complex in central Bolton. The college's mission is to offer high quality provision to learners at the age of 16 who wish to pursue a full-time course of study within the context of the ethos of a sixth form college. The college offers a broad range of courses with 20% at levels 1 or 2. Progression between levels and from level 3 to higher education is excellent.
2. Bolton is a relatively prosperous town with pockets of significant disadvantage. The minority ethnic population accounts for 11% of the total population but is concentrated in deprived inner wards of Daubhill, Central Burnden, Derby and Halliwell. These wards are amongst the most deprived in the country. Within Bolton as a whole, there is both under achievement at 16 and lower continuation rates into full-time education when compared to the national average.
3. The college draws from a diverse community and over 70% of its learners are from disadvantaged areas. Some 55% of learners identified themselves as belonging to a minority ethnic group in 2005/6. In recognition of the cultural diversity of the student body, the college has responded positively and was recently awarded the Association of Colleges' Beacon Award for Promoting Race Equality.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Outstanding: Grade 1
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Outstanding: contributory grade 1</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

4. This is a good college which successfully promotes a strong ethos of inclusivity, equality of opportunity and ambition for all. Learners enjoy their studies and make excellent progress within a harmonious learning community. Senior leaders and staff set challenging targets for learners who achieve good pass rates at all levels. However, the college recognises the need to improve the consistency of results on some level 3 vocational courses. Progression rates to higher education are excellent. There is much good teaching. Teachers prepare learners well for assessments and examinations. There is insufficient use of information and learning technologies (ILT) to promote teaching and learning across the curriculum.
5. The college has been highly successful in promoting widening participation, and actively responding to the learning needs of the local community. There are strong links with 11-16 schools. The monitoring of learners' progress is thorough and there are robust intervention strategies to support learners to achieve their learning targets. Care, guidance and advisory services are good. The college's approach to educational and social inclusion is outstanding.
6. Leadership and management are good. Governors and senior leaders have set a strong and innovative strategic direction. The college retains a strong sense of mission. Self-assessment is accurate and quality assurance systems are sound. The college recognises the need to strengthen curriculum leadership and management at middle management levels. Some accommodation is not fit for purpose. The college is outstanding in its promotion of equal opportunities, has outstanding capacity to improve and provides good value for money.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: Grade 1

7. Inspectors agreed with the college that its capacity to improve is outstanding. College plans have a strong focus on raising aspirations, improving the quality of provision for learners, and identifying and tackling areas for improvement. Success and pass rates are good and improving. Learners make excellent progress on GCE AS and A level courses. The focus on local learning needs and widening participation are outstanding. Quality assurance systems are effective. Management information systems now provide an improved level of service to all staff. Clear strategies and operational plans are in place to promote further and sustained improvement. Self-assessment is established, self-critical and largely accurate. Performance is monitored thoroughly.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

8. The college has made good progress in tackling the key issues raised in the last inspection. Management information systems have improved. Governors now systematically assess their own performance and governance has been significantly strengthened. Care, guidance and support for learners are well organised and the monitoring of learners' progress is good. Improvements to additional learning support and the use of learning mentors has greatly improved support for learners, especially those at risk of underachieving. Greater involvement of employers has improved work-related opportunities on vocational courses.

Key strengths

- good and improving pass rates
- outstanding progress made by learners on GCE AS and A level courses
- excellent progression made from level to level and into higher education
- strong and innovative strategic direction established by senior leaders and governors
- outstanding promotion of equal opportunities.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- consistency of standards on some level 3 vocational courses
- the use of ILT in teaching and learning
- leadership and management of the curriculum at middle management level
- poor quality of some accommodation.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

9. Achievement and standards are good. The college establishes high expectations for learners and they respond positively. Many learners enter the college with low or average prior attainment levels. Success and achievement rates at level 1 have consistently been above the national average. Success rates for both levels 2 and 3 over a three year period, demonstrate good improvement to above the national average when compared to similar colleges. Progress on GCE AS and A level courses is excellent. Improvement trends have been sustained in 2006/07. The college recognises that retention, although demonstrating some improvement, has not kept pace with the improvement in pass rates.
10. Success rates in 2005/06 for level 1 were 9% above the national average. Progression to level 2 courses is good. Success rates at level 2 were just above the national average in 2005/06 and demonstrated a 5% improvement on the previous year. Improvement trends were maintained in 2006/07. Pass rates for GCSE in English and mathematics have demonstrated year on year improvement in the percentage of learners obtaining grades A* to C; in 2007 60% of learners sitting mathematics and 56% in English achieved these grades. GNVQ success rates at level 2 declined to below the national average in 2005/06 but recovered in 2006/07. There were 71% of learners at level 2 who progressed to level 3 in 2006/07.
11. Success rates for level 3 courses demonstrate year on year improvement from 2004/05 to 2005/06 to just above the national average. Achievement rates rose by 9% between 2003/04 and 2006/07. Retention rates have not kept pace with achievement rates and continue to be of concern in a minority of areas. GCE A level pass rates have improved from 82% in 2004/05 to 88% in 2005/06. Further improvement occurred in 2006/07. In 2007, learners achieved 100% pass rate in 21 of the 35 subjects offered at A level and in 13 of the 37 subjects offered at AS level. Success rates for some vocational courses at level 3 remain below national average. Progress at GCE A level and AS level, as measured by the advanced level performance systems (ALPs) is excellent and has been maintained over several years. For example in 2006/07, outstanding or excellent value added was recorded on 20 courses at GCE A level.
12. The quality of learners' written and oral work is good. Learners demonstrate a strong sense of community, engage each other and staff, and fully embrace the college ethos of respect, opportunity and ambition. There are good arrangements for assessment. Homework is set regularly and returned promptly. Feedback is constructive and helps learners to improve their work. Work is well organised in learners' files. Attendance and punctuality are good. Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

13. The quality of teaching and learning is good. Lessons are well planned with clear objectives which are shared with learners. Schemes of work are detailed. Learners are enthusiastic and motivated, and classes are well managed. There is a strong focus on preparing learners for assessment and examinations. Lateness and inappropriate behaviour are challenged. In the better lessons learners are engaged and respond well, and the pace of these lessons is good. There is a good working relationship between teachers and learners that promotes learning. Learners use specialist subject terminology accurately. Most teachers employ a good range of methods to check learners' understanding. The use of questioning and hand-held mini whiteboards is good. In some sessions the teachers' questions fail to explore, challenge and extend learning. Activities are not always provided to challenge and extend the learning of more able learners. There is limited use of ILT in the classroom. A virtual learning environment (VLE) is in the early stages of development.
14. Lesson observation reports are thorough, have a good focus on learning and provide useful feedback for teachers. Action plans are not always sufficiently detailed. The reports inform self-assessment, appraisal and staff development. Identification and provision of additional learning support are good. Learners receiving additional learning support perform well. Communication between learning support and curriculum staff is good. The college provides opportunities for learners to develop an appropriate range of key skills. At level 3, few learners complete the full key skills qualification, although some 55% in 2005/06 achieved level 2 in information technology (IT).
15. The college's approach to educational and social inclusion is outstanding. A wide range of programmes are offered at level 2 and 3 with a more limited range at level 1. Progression between levels is excellent. There is excellent progression to higher education. On A level courses, 91% of learners progressed to higher education in 2006/07. The college's response to the widening participation agenda is outstanding. Close links with 14-19 local strategic partners ensures a coordinated and well focused response to local learning needs. Strong links with 11-16 feeder schools ensure that school leavers are very well informed about the college and courses. Many curriculum areas have good links with local universities.
16. There is good provision to meet the needs and interests of learners. The college works well with local employers to provide effective work experience opportunities for learners on health and early years programmes. On other vocational programmes there are opportunities for learners to experience the industrial and commercial world through projects, commercial and industry-based assignments, visits and guest speakers. There is a satisfactory cross-college enrichment programme, of which there is limited uptake. There is a good range of curriculum-based trips and visits.

17. Guidance and support are good. There are high expectations of learners and rigorous progress monitoring. Those learners at risk of underachieving or non completion are identified promptly and timely action is taken to support them. Attendance monitoring is rigorous and parents are swiftly alerted to potential problems. The Learning Mentor programme, introduced in 2006, is very successful in retaining and raising attainment of a vulnerable and “high risk of failure” group of learners; this has been further extended for 2007. There is strong management of on-programme support with clear evidence of improvement and planning for further improvement. For example, the college has correctly identified inconsistencies in the work of some personal tutors as an area for improvement and effective action is being taken to address this. The college recognises that the evaluation of basic skills support currently lacks the rigour of many of the other on-programme support processes.
18. Admissions and induction programmes are well planned and enable early identification of support needs. Support for progression to higher education is very good and well monitored across the college. For levels 1 and 2 there is a greater emphasis in tutorials on progression to employment. Learner surveys indicate that support for level 3 students applying for employment or an apprenticeship is more variable. Group tutorial provision is well structured and tutors are well supported to ensure that there is a consistent approach to delivery. There are effective learning support procedures with strong links between curriculum and learning support staff.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Contributory grades:

Equality of opportunity

Outstanding: Grade 1

19. Leadership and management are good. The governors, principal and senior managers provide clear strategic direction for the college. There is a strong emphasis on academic achievement and on responding to the needs of a diverse community. Staff at all levels share these priorities and success rates have improved over the last three years and are now just above national averages. The college has addressed successfully most of the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection. Most departments are well managed but the college recognises some unevenness at this level. There is a comprehensive quality assurance system that results in accurate self-assessment reports at whole-college and departmental levels. As a result, senior managers have a good understanding of the college’s strengths and weaknesses. Lesson observations, along with surveys and the outcomes from focus groups, provide detailed evidence about the nature and quality of learners’ experience.
20. The accommodation currently available for teaching and learning has some limitations. However, planning for the opening in September 2008 of the new south campus is at an advanced stage and the implications for teaching and learning of a new flexible learning environment are steering staff

development. Resources are satisfactory but there is little use of information and learning technology in the classroom and the learning resource centre at the north campus is very small. The premises are very well maintained.

21. The practice and promotion of equal opportunities is outstanding and permeates the life of the college. Learners understand and respect the cultural traditions of the various ethnic groups within the college. Monitoring of performance by gender and ethnic origin is thorough. The college has clear policies on equal opportunities and race equality, and it complies with the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 (SENDA). Policy and practice regarding child protection are excellent. The few examples of racial incidents and bullying have been handled sensitively and effectively.
22. Teaching staff are well qualified for their current roles and the induction of new staff is thorough. There is a sound appraisal system. Staff development is based on the needs identified through lesson observations and the wide range of self-assessment measures. A good range of management information about learners' prior achievement, current needs, progress and other matters is now available and is used effectively by many managers and subject teachers.
23. Governance is a strength. Governors bring to the college valuable expertise in business, finance, law, education and other useful fields. They have a clear commitment to the ethos and direction of the college and are very well informed about learners' achievements, the quality of teaching and learning, and financial matters. They have been influential in the planning of the new campus. Governors assess their work against specific targets and there are very good arrangements for their training and for the induction of new governors. The college provides good value for money.

Learner's achievements

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

16-18						19+			
Notional Level	Exp End Year	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
1 Long	04/05	115	64	66	-2	62	44	42	2
	05/06	91	77	68	9	1	100	50	50
	06/07	161	77			0			
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	38	66			2	0		
	05/06	39	82			0			
	06/07	31	87			1	0		
NVQs	04/05	0				0			
	05/06	0				0			
	06/07	0				0			
Other	04/05	154	64	66	-2	122	44	42	2
	05/06	52	73	68	5	1	100	50	50
	06/07	0				0			

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

16-18						19+			
Notional Level	Exp End Year	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
2 Long	04/05	745	77	74	3	32	34	53	-19
	05/06	774	82	80	2	13	85	60	25
	06/07	832	86			0			
GCSEs	04/05	593	77	78	-1	15	60		
	05/06	602	85	83	2	11	91		
	06/07	646	87			16	100		
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	152	74	73	1	5	40		
	05/06	165	76	83	-7	0			
	06/07	164	86			1	100		
NVQs	04/05	0				0			
	05/06	0				0			
	06/07	0				0			
Other	04/05	75	63	70	-7	85	39	40	-1
	05/06	31	81	72	9	0			
	06/07	0				0			

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2005 to 2007, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
3 Long	04/05	2196	73	75	-2	42	69	58	11
	05/06	2180	78	77	1	40	68	67	1
	06/07	2402	80			0			
A/A2 Levels	04/05	741	82	90	-8	21	81		
	05/06	697	88	91	-3	21	71		
	06/07	720	92	-	-	27	96		
AS Levels	04/05	1332	68	69	-1	20	60		
	05/06	1302	75	73	2	14	64		
	06/07	1533	77	-	-	19	95		
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	119	65	65	0	2	0		
	05/06	159	64	65	-1	3	67		
	06/07	149	56	-	-	13	92		
NVQs	04/05	0				0			
	05/06	0				0			
	06/07	0				0			
Other	04/05	0				0			
	05/06	0				0			
	06/07	0				0			