

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: University of the Arts, London

Date of visit: 22 April 2008

This feedback contains brief findings from the pilot assessment visit. It focuses on the issues explored during the visit and does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the institution's performance.

Context

The University of Arts, London, established in 2004, comprises the five art colleges of the former London Institute, and Wimbledon College of Art. The six colleges within the university are Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, Chelsea College of Art and Design, London College of Fashion, London College of Communication and Wimbledon College of Art. The university offers specialist courses in art, design and communication from level 3 to post-graduate level. Approximately one-third of the university's students are enrolled on further education courses, with over 2,000 students on the foundation diploma in art and design.

Achievement and standards

Success rates for long level 3 courses remain high. The majority of students are studying the foundation diploma in art and design and university success rates are above the national average for this qualification. The university's self-assessment report (SAR) identifies some differences in performance across the six constituent colleges, but all have success rates at or above national averages.

Retention rates for students aged 16 to 18 have improved by 8 percentage points over the last three years and are now well above average. This rate of improvement exceeds the increase in the national rate. Retention rates for students aged over 19 have improved at a slower rate, but remain above average. Achievement rates are consistently high for both age groups.

Success rates on short courses have been above average for students aged 16 to 18 for each of the last three years. However they declined in 2006/07 for students over 19 and were below national averages. The university has identified particular issues in two constituent colleges, where short course success rates were well below average, and has made appropriate changes to the curriculum structure and

improvements in quality assurance and assessment. At the time of the visit, success rate data was not available for these courses and it is too early to determine the impact of these actions.

Standards of students' work remain high. In a sample of work seen by inspectors, there was evidence of high quality drawing, sensitive markmaking and good developmental and exploratory work through sketchbooks. Changes to management structures and improved rigour in the quality assurance processes have improved the consistency of assessment and the quality of written feedback.

Quality of education and training

Inspectors visited Chelsea College of Art and Design and London College of Communication to explore progress made in improving teaching and learning. The following feedback is based on findings from these two colleges.

Teaching and learning

The university has focussed on improving teaching and learning through increased staff development. This has included additional opportunities for part-time staff to take refresher courses in their own subject specialism or in related disciplines. Chelsea College of Art and Design has moved to a single site since the last inspection, which has brought the foundation course to a single location and helped staff to work together more closely and to share good practice. The university has also introduced a three-college model, whereby Chelsea, Camberwell and Wimbledon Colleges are working together in a collegiate structure to support further developments in teaching and learning, assessment, moderation and staff development. Staff at Chelsea spoke very positively about the benefits this is having on developing ways of working, sharing best practice and staff communications. They are developing formal and informal networks to share ideas and practice and this is supporting a much more reflective culture amongst staff.

The university validated its own foundation diploma qualification, which was introduced in all colleges in September 2007. The new course structure is very clear and well understood by staff and students. It effectively supports students making the transition from level 3 to 4 work and aids progression to higher education (HE). Project briefs are clearly structured, with clear outcomes aligned to unit assessment criteria and well defined timetables for students. Students report that they know what is required of them and that assessment feedback helps them to understand how to improve their work. Regular opportunities to present their work in group critiques helps prepare them well for HE.

Students and staff make good use of the virtual learning environment (VLE), both as a means of communication between students and tutors and to provide access to a wide range of course related resources. For example, all contextual studies lecture materials are uploaded so that students can access information to consolidate learning or to catch up if they have missed a session.

The process for observing teachers is identified as an area for further development in the SAR. The committee structure is strong and allows staff across the different colleges to discuss good practice and improve provision. Whilst the process requires observations for all staff every three years, most observations are carried out on a sampled, targeted basis. Triggers for these targeted observations happen as a result of course reviews, student feedback, peer observations from team teaching or declining outcomes of success rates. For example, London College of Communication has recently targeted part-time teachers who work on short course provision that takes place in the evening as a result of decline in short course success rates for adults. Intervention by senior managers is appropriate and issues relating to underperformance in teaching are dealt with effectively. Although such actions are taken the university does not yet summarise or analyse the outcomes of the targeted sample work to set specific measurable outcomes for improvements in teaching and learning overall. The university does not routinely observe all staff to identify good practice and areas for improvement across the institution.

The university has increased the emphasis on good attendance and punctuality. Attendance monitoring is taking place with an emphasis on students' individual responsibility to attend and be punctual. Students are required to notify staff of any planned absence, and unnotified absence is followed up by telephone, text message or letter. Students report that their tutors are aware of any absences and monitor this with individual students.

Students are articulate and very enthusiastic about the individual support they receive from specialist subject staff and course tutors. Students interviewed, whose first language is not English, receive very effective specialist support both in English lessons and from additional support staff who are available for help and guidance with assignments and during group critiques.

Subject teachers have received training on aspects of specialist student support. For example, at London College of Communication, one part-time animation tutor worked effectively with a student with Aspergers syndrome and has subsequently attended specific training in this field. This expertise is now used to guide and help other students and staff.

Leadership and management

The university has taken appropriate steps to improve access for staff and students with restricted mobility across the whole estate. An external audit was carried out after the last inspection and a significant number of actions identified and costed. Although the university has not yet been able to carry out all works identified, it has spent considerable funds, effectively rectifying the most problematic areas, placing priority on initial access to entrances, moving around buildings and toilet facilities. Accommodation plans, including relocation, show how remaining issues will enable the whole estate to be fully accessible, or reasonable adjustments made. Disabled students worked closely with the university on improving access, facilities and services.

The university has carried out extensive work to ensure it meets the requirements of current race relations and disability discrimination legislation. There is now a new central team of two full-time staff and an administrator who are responsible for university wide equality and diversity matters. Staff in all colleges have received training on equality. A diversity committee ensures consistency across all colleges with training on race and disability equality and the university taking a non-discriminatory approach in all aspects of its work. The university uses forum meetings and networks with students from minority groups to identify the best ways to take issues forward and improve practice.

The university has an accurate view of its strengths and areas requiring further improvement through the self-assessment process, which is more self-critical and evaluative than at the last inspection. There is now a culture of regular review and continual improvement and staff are regularly involved in this evaluative process.