

Ashton-under-Lyne Sixth Form College

Inspection report

Provider reference 130518
Published date June 2008

Contents

Background information	3
Summary of grades awarded	5
Overall judgement	6
Key strengths and areas for improvement	7
Main findings	8

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 achievement 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. Ashton-under-Lyne Sixth Form College was established in 1980 following a reorganisation of secondary education in the borough of Tameside. The borough has a population of around 213,000 and consists of seven towns. The largest towns are Ashton-under-Lyne and Hyde. Unemployment in Tameside is lower than the national average. The proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups is below the national average at 5.4%. Tameside residents have some of the lowest rates of pay in the Greater Manchester sub-region. Over a third of residents have no academic qualifications. There are sixteen schools for students aged 11 to 16, two schools for students aged 11 to 18 and one general further education (GFE) college in the Tameside area.
2. In 2005/06, there were 2,353 students on roll of whom 1,728 were aged 16 to 18 and 625 were aged 19 and over. Of the full-time equivalent enrolments (FTEs) for 16 to 18 year olds, 91% were at level 3. For students aged 19 and over, 58% were at level 1, 22% at level 2 and 16% at level 3. The majority of college courses are general certificate of education (GCE) A and AS levels. In addition, the college offers a number of BTEC national and applied advanced level courses and level 2 courses including GCSE mathematics, English and science. In recent years, the college has established level 4 provision for students aged 19 and over. Three foundation degrees are offered in partnership with universities. The college has a Train to Gain contract and was awarded business college status in 2006. A new principal was appointed in 2007 and several senior managers have been appointed recently. The college mission is to develop and improve the opportunities for education and training for post-16 students in the local community.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Satisfactory: Grade 3
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Good: Contributory Grade 2</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

3. Overall effectiveness is satisfactory. GCE A and AS level success rates are below average. Overall success rates on level 3 qualifications have remained below average since the previous inspection and declined last year. Retention rates have improved significantly this year. The progress made by students on GCE A and AS courses varies considerably between subjects but is good overall. Progression rates to higher education and from level 2 to level 3 are good. The college has an outstanding approach to including all students. The proportion of students recruited from minority ethnic groups is more than double the percentage of those groups within the population of Tameside. Students from minority ethnic groups perform equally well and often better than other students. There is an extremely broad curriculum that includes a large proportion of vocational courses and at a variety of levels. Students participate in an extensive range of enrichment activities that contribute significantly to their personal development and well-being. Teaching and learning are good and the system that is in place to ensure improvement is rigorous. Students receive satisfactory support. There is an effective system to identify and support students' additional learning needs; although more than a quarter of students did not take up the offer of support last year. One-to-one tutorials are effective; however, group tutorials do not always contribute to students' progress. Leadership and management are satisfactory. There is very good leadership and a strong commitment to quality improvement. The self-assessment process has improved and become more rigorous; however, there are areas for improvement in the review process at course and curriculum level. Information systems are being used effectively to ensure that students' overall progress is closely monitored. The college is strong financially and provides satisfactory value for money.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

4. The college's capacity to improve is good. Leaders recognise the need for improvement and have set challenging yet realistic targets to achieve their goals. College data indicate that there have been significant improvements in retention rates, the modular examination results and the attendance of students. Most key areas for improvement identified by inspectors had already been recognised and targeted by college leaders in the self-assessment report. The college has introduced a new quality review process, reviewed many of its policies and procedures, established student-led focus groups, is formulating a new teaching and learning strategy, and recently re-structured its management and staff team. There has been insufficient time to measure the impact of some of these changes. However, most staff and students are positive about the change process and express the view that the college is moving in the right direction.

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

5. Good progress has been made in addressing most of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. The quality assurance process has become more rigorous, particularly in the last year. The evaluation of staff development is effective and focused on bringing about improvements in teaching and learning. Achievement rates in GCE A level mathematics have improved significantly. However, pass rates on some level 3 courses have not improved and remain below the national average. In 2006/07, success rates on level 3 courses declined significantly and are below the national average. In January 2008, modular examinations pass rates on GCE A level programmes improved by 3% and a larger proportion of high grades were achieved.

Key strengths

- outstanding approach to educational and social inclusion
- good teaching and learning
- outstanding curriculum that is very responsive to local requirements
- very good leadership with strong commitment to quality improvement.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- improving students' success rates particularly at level 3
- improving the effectiveness of course review and self-assessment in some curriculum areas
- improving the effectiveness of group tutorials and the uptake of additional learning support.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Satisfactory: Grade 3

6. Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Overall success rates are around the national average for sixth form colleges. The success rate for students aged 16 to 18 on level 3 courses declined in 2006/07 to 78%; this is below the 2005/06 national average for sixth form colleges. The overall retention rate in 2005/06 was 92% which was 2% above the national average and current retention rates show signs of improvement. The overall pass rate in 2005/06 was 88% which was just below the national average for sixth form colleges. The pass rate at GCE A level in 2006/07 was 93%; slightly below the national average. The pass rate at GCE AS level in 2006/07 was 82% which is below the national average.
7. Some students make good or better progress, given their starting points, on level 3 courses. However, there is considerable variation in progress rates between subjects and groups. The college is more inclusive than many sixth form colleges and offers programmes of study at a wide variety of levels. Overall success rates on level 2 courses in 2006/07 were high and above the national average. The GCSE success rate in 2005/06 was 87% which compares very well with the sixth form college average of 80.4%. Overall success rates on level 1 courses were very low in 2006/07 and adversely affected by very low pass rates on courses offered to students in addition to their main qualifications. Attendance levels are good and improving, unauthorised absence was reduced from 7.6% to 4.5% in 2007. The small number of students aged 19 and over on long courses achieve high success rates. The college has recently developed a Train to Gain programme and the small number of students who have completed so far have shown satisfactory levels of achievement.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

8. The quality of teaching and learning is good. The college has maintained the high standards evident at the last inspection and made further improvements in other key aspects such as the use of information and learning technology (ILT) in the classroom. Students are positive about their lessons and about the impact on their learning of the good working relationships with teachers. Teachers have a good knowledge of their learners' needs and most plan lessons to suit different learning styles. Some lessons are too directed by the teacher and progress at a pace that takes insufficient account of students' needs. The lesson observation process is well established and has helped managers to accurately assess and raise the overall standard of teaching and learning. The recently introduced system of peer observations is used to good effect in sharing good practice and is well received by teachers. Assessment is fair, accurate and reliable and often helps learners to identify how and where they can improve. Learning resources are good and used well by students.
9. There is an outstanding curriculum that is very responsive to local requirements. It is very diverse by sixth form college standards and successfully

meets the needs and interests of the wide variety of students the college attracts. Recruitment in 2007 was significantly above target. The range of GCE A and AS courses offered is broad and around one third of students participate in a good vocational programme. At level 2, the curriculum includes a suitable range of GCSE subjects. The programme for students aged 19 and over includes a Train to Gain programme which effectively incorporates support for literacy and numeracy in the workplace. The enrichment programme is broad and attracts a large number of participants. The range of activities includes an excellent mix of sporting, community based and cultural activities developed in consultation with learners. The programme is carefully timetabled so that nearly all students are able to attend. Programmes are devised carefully after consultation with local employers and community groups to ensure they meet the needs of students.

10. Guidance and support for students are satisfactory. One-to-one tutorials are particularly good and tutors work collaboratively and well to monitor the performance of students. Students speak very highly of their tutors and the effect that tutors have on their motivation and progress. Group tutorials are less effective and students are less complimentary about them. Initial advice and guidance are satisfactory overall. Significant improvements have been made recently to inconsistencies in the quality of pre-course guidance. Students on some programmes are not sufficiently well prepared for the demands of their studies. Support for students with additional learning needs is effective. Success rates of students who receive support are at least as high and in some cases better than those who do not need it. However, too many students identified as needing support do not receive it. Over the last three years the take-up rate has fluctuated but has declined overall. In 2006/07, only 70% of those identified as in need of support received it. There are signs of improvement in the take-up of support this year. The college has recently improved the systems for collecting student views through student surveys, focus groups and a recently re-vitalised student council. The college takes action on the feedback it receives but systems for analysing findings and reporting back to students are underdeveloped.

Leadership and management

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Contributory grades:

Equality of opportunity

Good: Grade 2

11. Leadership and management are satisfactory. The college has responded well to most areas for improvement identified at the last inspection; however, it has not yet been able to consistently improve pass rates on level 3 courses. This has been identified as a priority and very good leadership has led to a strong focus on quality improvement. Some far-reaching changes have been made in the last year and others are planned. Policies, processes and structures have been reviewed and changes made. Recently there are some improvements to key areas of the college's performance. The effectiveness of governance is satisfactory and is improving. Governors are better informed about college performance and becoming more able to hold senior managers to account. The

quality of minutes and communications systems within the governing body has improved.

12. The quality assurance process has been revised and is more rigorous. It provides a firm basis upon which to develop plans for improvement. The lesson observation system produces accurate information for self-assessment and the analysis of management information provides a sound basis to set challenging yet realistic targets. Some curriculum areas and cross-college services are insufficiently rigorous in the evaluation of their performance; for example, some judgements are unclear and some parts of the self-assessment report are too descriptive and insufficiently evaluative.
13. Resources for learning are good. Teachers are well qualified, their performance is appraised accurately. Staff benefit from a broad range of development opportunities which place emphasis on improving teaching and learning. Where underperformance is identified action is taken to make improvements. The college is financially strong and provides satisfactory value for money.
14. Equality of opportunity is good. The college has an inclusive mission and this is reflected in its broad and responsive curriculum. The college promotes equality of opportunity very effectively. It has developed very strong community links and partnerships with local organisations and employers. The college's response to recent legislation, including equality relating to race and disability, and to child protection is good. The college follows the appropriate procedures in regards to the arrangements for safeguarding children. Incidents of harassment and bullying are very rare, and when they occur are dealt with sensitively and effectively. The five themes of Every Child Matters are given a high profile in the planning and quality assurance processes.

Learners' achievement

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.

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>
1 Long	04/05	125	92	64	28	47	49	56	-7
	05/06	125	80	71	9	99	42	56	-14
	06/07	329	40	*		120	56		
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	14	93	71	22	...			
	05/06	15	100	79	21	...			
	06/07	14	93	*		...			
Other	04/05	111	92	63	29	47	49	56	-7
	05/06	110	77	71	6	99	42	56	-14
	06/07	315	38	*		120	56	*	

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.

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>
2 Long	04/05	610	78	73	5	17	35	56	-21
	05/06	406	85	78	7	39	82	64	18
	06/07	680	90	*		...	70	*	
GCSEs	04/05	445	77	78	-1	4	75	65	10
	05/06	289	88	82	6	18	72	66	6
	06/07	257	82	*		...			
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	121	80	74	6	...			
	05/06	25	76	77	-1	...			
	06/07	49	84	*		...			
Other	04/05	44	84	62	22	13	23	52	-29
	05/06	92	79	70	9	21	90	61	29
	06/07	138	96	*		52	62	*	

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	4,761	79	82	-3	60	70	59	11
	05/06	4,980	82	83	-1	32	56	65	-9
	06/07	5,143	78	*		58	91	*	
A/A2 Levels	04/05	1,623	92	92	0	12	83	76	7
	05/06	1,593	93	93	0	3	100	78	22
	06/07	1,756	89	*		18	94	*	
AS Levels	04/05	2,897	72	78	-6	3	33	54	-21
	05/06	3,026	76	79	-3	5	60	58	2
	06/07	3,051	72	*		8	88	*	
GNVQs and precursors	04/05	173	68	74	-6	1	100		
	05/06	140	81	74	7	1	0		
	06/07		
Other	04/05	68	69	72	-3	44	68	56	12
	05/06	221	78	75	3	23	52	62	-10
	06/07	336	73	*		32	91	*	

* denotes no national average for comparison

... denotes no enrolments