

# Aquinas 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](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

#### Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent 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](http://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. Aquinas College is a popular Catholic Sixth Form College in Stockport. The college has for many years been oversubscribed. It has a clear admissions system with priority given to Catholic applicants and the remaining places are allocated in order of application not student ability. The college is owned by the Diocese of Shrewsbury. Stockport is one of the most diverse boroughs in England, overall it is a relatively prosperous area with low unemployment but there are local pockets of high deprivation. In 2007/08 the college enrolled 1,873 students aged 16 to 18; the majority are full-time students studying advanced level AS and A2 courses. The college also offers vocational courses in business, sport and performing arts at levels 2 and 3, a re-sit GCSE programme and a skills for life course for a small number of students with moderate

learning difficulties. The college's adult education programme enrolled around 800 part-time students in 2007– 08 on leisure courses and 400 students on Skills for Life and Information Technology (IT) courses. The majority of students are from the Stockport area and around half are Catholic. The low proportion from minority ethnic groups is above the proportion in the local population. The college works very closely with its partner Catholic secondary schools and provides a gifted and talented programme for pupils in Key Stage 4 and basic skills courses for around 30 students aged 14 to 16 who are at risk of exclusion from school.

2. The college's philosophy is based on Christian values; specifically those of freedom, justice and love. The college aims to help each student to develop by providing experiences which help in the search for truth; in making informed decisions; in accepting responsibility for one's actions and in co-operating with others in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. It has a distinctive ethos which underpins all its work.

## Summary of grades awarded

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

## Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

3. Aquinas is an outstanding college. The college provides a very welcoming and positive learning environment and students enjoy the opportunities and experiences offered. There is a strong commitment to the Catholic ethos at all levels. The college community effectively promotes the Gospel values of freedom, justice and love. The well-planned ethics programme is valued by students and their personal development is outstanding. Achievement and standards are good. The progress made by the majority of students is very good. Teaching and learning are good. The use of information learning technology (ILT) to enhance learning and students' enjoyment is very good.
4. Teachers and support staff work very well together to provide outstanding guidance and support. The college's response to education and social inclusion is outstanding. A broad curriculum meets the needs of students very well. Alternative pathways are available for students not yet ready to study at advanced level and the college works hard to engage students who may otherwise not participate in further education. Extensive enrichment activities and voluntary work enhances students' skills. The Every Child Matters themes are embedded in all aspects of college life.
5. Leadership and management are outstanding. A clear strategic direction places students at the centre. Equality of opportunity is outstanding. Quality assurance arrangements are well developed and the report is broadly accurate. Excellent partnership working enables the college to meet the needs of the community and widen participation very well. The college buildings are crowded and a major new building programme has been started. Governance is outstanding and the college provides outstanding value for money.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

6. Capacity to improve is good. The college has been successful in maintaining high success rates on most courses since the last inspection. Quality assurance arrangements are effective. The process is fully inclusive and well understood by staff. Where areas for improvement are identified strategies are put in place to address them; however, on some courses they have been slow to have an impact. The resulting self-assessment report and grades awarded by the college are broadly accurate. However, it is too descriptive and lacks sufficient detailed evidence to support judgements. Management information is used widely to monitor and evaluate progress.

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

7. The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to improve since the last inspection is good and most areas for development have been addressed. The

college has started a £42million building programme that is on schedule for completion in May 2010. The key skills policy has been amended and success rates have improved. The curriculum offer has been extended and meets the needs of students very well. Success rates have remained high on most courses; however, some of the low performing curriculum areas have not improved since the previous inspection. Action plans to drive forward improvements are in place and understood by staff, however, targets for improvement are not always clear, and monitoring of progress is variable in quality.

### Key strengths

- very inclusive college
- high success rates on many courses
- very good value added on A2 courses
- highly effective use of ILT to support learning
- outstanding range of courses and enrichment opportunities
- excellent individual support for students
- productive partnerships
- outstanding leadership to achieve the college's mission and Catholic ethos
- outstanding governance.

### Areas for improvement

*The college should address:*

- low success rates on a minority of courses
- insufficient rigour in teaching and learning observations
- slow pace of improvement in a minority of underperforming areas
- aspects of self-assessment.

## Main findings

### Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

8. Achievement and standards are good and inspectors agreed with the college's self assessment. The college has high expectations of all students and they achieve well in their courses. Nearly all students aged 16 to 18 are enrolled on AS and A2 courses where the success rates, excluding general studies, are very high. Overall retention is very good and around 90% of students successfully progress from AS to A2 courses. The proportion of high grades continues to increase each year and in 2008 half the A2 grades were A or B. Students make outstanding progress in A2 and their progress on AS courses relative to their prior attainment is good. Students from minority ethnic groups generally do well.
9. Overall pass rates on AS and A2 courses are high and in half of the A2 subjects achievement was 100% in 2008. The pass rates on a minority of AS and A2 courses are below the national average. The college is aware of the courses where performance is below the college's high standards and actions are in place to bring about improvement but some have been slow to impact. The college's policy for all level 3 students to complete the AS and A2 general studies course in the second year of their programme adversely affects the college's overall high success rate. Almost 90% of level 3 students successfully progress to higher education and many gain places at prestigious universities. In 2008 some individual students achieved exceptionally well and achieved top marks nationally in A2 theology, biology, English language and further mathematics.
10. The proportion of students successfully achieving a GCSE grade A\*-C has improved consistently over the last three years and is very good. Pass rates on vocational courses are very high. Around 20% of level 2 students progress to a level 3 course at the college. Success rates on level 1 and level 2 IT courses, which are mostly delivered as an additional course for those students without an IT qualification, are broadly satisfactory. The achievement of adult learners is satisfactory. The small number of pupils aged 14 to 16 achieve very well.
11. Students are mature in their approach to learning. They attend regularly and respond well to the college's ethos. Students are very supportive of each other in and out of lessons and contribute positively to college life. The standard of students' work is high and their behaviour is exemplary. The spiritual and moral development of students is outstanding.

### Quality of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

12. The quality of teaching and learning are good. In the better lessons teachers make good use of the outcomes from initial assessment to plan a diverse range of activities that motivate and meet the needs of students. The college has invested successfully in the use of ILT to improve teaching and learning and students' enjoyment of lessons. For example, chemistry teachers make very



effective use of ILT to enhance practical lessons. Students are able to access high quality electronic learning resources and course materials on the college's virtual learning environment. These are used well outside lessons to consolidate their learning. New arrangements, introduced in autumn 2007, were designed to improve the rigour of the observation of teaching. However, the arrangements for moderating and ensuring consistency in the grades awarded are not sufficiently robust and there is some over-grading. The outcomes of observation are not sufficiently effective in providing clear guidance to individual teachers on what they need to do to improve. The college's strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning, including staff development and mentoring, have not been effectively targeted until this academic year. The impact of the support on the quality of lessons is not sufficiently monitored. Students enjoy their lessons. Most students receive useful feedback on their work which helps them to improve. Their progress on all aspects of their programme is monitored effectively by tutors, apart from in AS and A2 general studies. Parents receive regular information about how students are progressing.

13. The college provides an outstanding range of provision which meets the needs of its students very well. The majority of students who study at level 3 are able to choose from over 50 AS and A2 subjects and flexible timetabling ensures that they are able to follow their chosen combination of options. Care is taken to ensure that all students have a level 2 qualification in literacy, numeracy and IT by the end of their time at the college. A small range of vocational courses at levels 2 and 3 provide alternative options in sport, leisure, business and performing arts and an entry level programme meets the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. GCSE options are available in 10 subjects which, together with level 2 vocational courses provide a pathway for those not yet ready to follow level 3 provision.
14. Students' programmes are enhanced by a very wide range of enrichment activities. Through participation in a wide range of voluntary work, particularly the India project, students make a significant contribution to the local and wider community. Students develop the skills needed to help them progress to higher education and employment through work placements. The college works very hard to provide courses for those who might otherwise not participate. A well-planned programme of courses for adults provides a range of leisure and accredited options specifically targeted to disadvantaged communities. Courses are also provided to help adults develop the skills needed to secure employment and to progress to higher education.
15. The college makes a very good contribution to the local authority 14 to 19 action plan. It provides a good range of provision for 14 to 16 year olds. The college works in partnership with the local authority to provide numeracy, literacy and IT courses for 30 young people excluded from local schools. Four departments provide taster courses for gifted and talented school pupils to raise their aspirations. The college works extremely well with key partners to provide an inclusive environment for students; social and educational inclusion are outstanding.

16. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgement that students continue to benefit from outstanding guidance and support. Pastoral care is fully embedded in the college's ethos and structure. The excellent individual support is consistent with the college's mission to value each member of the community, recognising the dignity and unique nature of the individual. Pre-entry advice and guidance is detailed and thorough and well-planned induction helps students make informed course choices and quickly settle into college life.
17. All students complete an initial assessment prior to induction and a comprehensive subject diagnostic assessment to identify additional individual needs. Vulnerable students are quickly identified and cared for by teachers, personal tutors and the college's support services who work together very well to provide appropriate support sensitively. Students with specific learning difficulties and disabilities are very well supported and the college is beginning to analyse the impact of learning support. Students receive extensive individual support from teachers in and out of lessons and additional workshops in most subjects.
18. The group tutorial programme appropriately develops students' personal development and encourages them to adopt safe and healthy lifestyles and contribute positively to the local and wider community. Students are set challenging targets for the standard of their work; they enjoy the wide range of opportunities available. Systems for monitoring attendance, punctuality and learner progress are very effective. These are supported by excellent management information made available in the pastoral log on the college's on-line management information system. Careers guidance is successful in helping students progress into higher education, employment or further training. Students' views are captured in a wide variety of ways and used effectively to improve services for them.
19. A well-planned ethics programme, a full-time lay chaplain and the college's strong ethos of mutual respect and tolerance are valued by students. Students are encouraged to think independently and reflect upon their own lives and the lives of others in thoughtful and creative ways. Students sensitively explore spiritual, moral and ethical issues. The liturgical life of the college is celebrated by staff and students through daily morning prayer and a weekly Mass or Eucharistic service, though owing to lunchtime arrangements this is not available to all. Students are involved in the planning and participation of liturgy through music, drama and media input into prayer and worship.

Leadership and management

Outstanding: Grade 1

*Contributory grade:*

*Equality of opportunity*

*outstanding: grade 1*

20. Leadership and management are outstanding. The leadership and management style is open, supportive and highly valued by staff. The principal, senior managers and governors are fully committed to the college's mission and

Catholic ethos. They work very well together to ensure that all activities and relationships reflect these principles. The strategic planning process is effective and there is good ownership of the strategic aims by all staff. Strategic planning focuses on meeting the needs of the Catholic community and makes a strong contribution to the well being of the wider community. The principal with the senior management team set a clear direction. All staff support the college's key objective of valuing students individually and providing outstanding provision to meet their needs. The senior leadership team ensures the college retains its strong Catholic identity. Briefings and meetings regularly open with a prayer. Assemblies and liturgical events throughout the year provide good opportunities to celebrate faith and spirituality.

21. Governance is outstanding. Highly committed and experienced governors are clear about their role. They monitor performance effectively and contribute fully to the college's strategic direction. Governors' have good links with curriculum areas and have a clear understanding of areas for improvement.
22. Equality of opportunity is outstanding and is embedded throughout the college. A very welcoming and positive atmosphere reflects a culture of equality, tolerance, respect, support and success. The college fulfils its obligations in relation to race, equality and disability legislation. Physical access for students with limited mobility is restricted; however, alternative arrangements are in place to ensure equal access to courses. The college has appropriate arrangements to meet government requirements on safeguarding and child protection. The proportion of students from minority ethnic background at 8% is higher than in the local population. Data are used effectively to monitor the performance of under-represented groups. Excellent partnership working enables the college to meet the needs of the community and widen participation very well.
23. Quality assurance systems are well developed; areas for improvement identified and acted upon. Overall success rates are high and have remained constant over the last three years. College managers are aware of the few courses where success rates are below the national average and provide appropriate support and monitoring to improve. Whilst some have improved performance the impact in a minority of courses is too slow. Recently there has been a strong focus on improving teaching and the observation system but it is too early to judge the impact of these strategies. Managers work hard at improving the provision; however, accountability is sometimes unclear. The college is financially strong and provides outstanding value for money. A major rebuild of the whole college, planned for completion in May 2010 commenced recently.

## Learners' achievements

Table 1: Success rates on mainstream level 1 long qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, compared to the national rate for colleges of a similar type

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
All Long - Level 1	05/06	147	24	71	-47	159	34	57	-23
	06/07	239	44	73	-29	105	50	64	-14
	07/08	171	42	-	-	72	42	-	-
GNVQs/ AVCEs	05/06	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06/07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	07/08								
NVQs	05/06	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06/07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	07/08								
Other	05/06	147	24	71	-47	159	34	57	-23
	06/07	239	44	72	-28	105	50	64	-14
	07/08	171	42	-	-	72	42	-	-

Table 2: Success rates on mainstream level 2 long qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, compared to the national rate for colleges of a similar type

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
All Long - Level 2	05/06	480	73	78	-5	156	51	65	-14
	06/07	582	67	82	-15	181	54	65	-11
	07/08	412	78	-	-	103	66	-	-
GCSEs	05/06	323	78	82	-4	70	67	67	0
	06/07	270	79	83	-4	85	62	68	-6
	07/08	243	88	-	-	62	74	-	-
GNVQs/ AVCEs	05/06	32	81	77	4	...	...	...	...
	06/07	20	100	78	22	...	...	...	...
	07/08	20	55	-	-	-	-	-	-
NVQs	05/06	14	64	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06/07	6	83	...	...	...	...	...	...
	07/08	8	88						
Other	05/06	111	56	70	-14	86	38	62	-24
	06/07	286	52	79	-27	96	46	62	-16
	07/08	141	63	-	-	41	54	-	-

Table 3: Success rates on mainstream level 3 long qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, compared to the national rate for colleges of a similar type

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts - Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
All Long - Level 3	05/06	6978	85	84	1	111	48	65	-17
	06/07	7372	86	85	1	74	57	69	-12
	07/08	7295	84	-	-	93	78	-	-
A/A2 Levels	05/06	2565	92	93	-1	20	85	78	7
	06/07	3154	91	93	-2	13	85	80	5
	07/08	2581	91	-	-	33	88	-	-
AS Levels	05/06	4292	82	79	3	11	82	58	24
	06/07	4153	82	81	1	9	78	61	17
	07/08	4310	80	-	-	33	85	-	-
GNVQs/ AVCEs	05/06	112	67	77	-10	6	67	...	...
	06/07	33	36	65	-29	...	...	...	...
	07/08	89	51	-	-	-	-	-	-
NVQs	05/06	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	06/07	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
	07/08	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	05/06	9	0	79	-79	74	31	62	-31
	06/07	32	41	80	-39	52	46	66	-20
	07/08	315	81	-	-	27	59	-	-