

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Hastings College of Arts and Technology
Date of visit: 5 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 do 2005/06 data tell us about learners' outcomes? Has there been an improvement in learners' outcomes in construction and information and communications technology (ICT)?

- College data for success rates on long courses in 2005/06 show that learners' outcomes are close to the national average. In comparison to data for 2004/05, for learners aged 16-18 success rates improved at levels 1 and 2, but declined at level 3. For adult learners, success rates improved at level 2, but there was no improvement at levels 1 and 3. Pass rates improved on courses at levels 1 and 2 for both age groups, and remain high on most courses. However, there was no improvement in the proportion of learners who complete their courses, which is low in some areas. Success rates in construction improved and were close to the national average, which is low. In ICT, appropriate steps have been taken to tackle the poor outcomes for learners aged 16-18 at level 3.

Are any improvements in success rates likely in 2006/07? Have strategies to improve retention been effective?

- The college is cautiously optimistic that success rates will rise in 2006/07. Provisional college data for 2006/07 show an improvement in retention rates, especially for adult learners, and strategies to improve retention rates are beginning to have an impact. Assuming that pass rates remain high in most areas, the college expects to see an improvement in success rates in 2006/07 that is at least in line with the improving national average. However, senior managers do not expect the full impact of the changes that have recently been made to show through in college performance data until 2007/08.

What progress has been made in the current year in improving the proportion of apprentices who complete their full framework?

- The proportion of apprentices who complete their frameworks has improved significantly over the last year, but is still low. In some vocational areas, particularly plumbing, learners are making slow progress, with several apprentices being on programme for up to 24 months beyond their proposed completion date. Managers are aware of the need to accelerate the progress of some apprentices, and are taking appropriate action to tackle the issues. Although there are some encouraging signs, it is too early to assess the impact on timely completion rates.

Quality of education and training

What is being done to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and what is the impact?

- The college is making good progress in developing a coherent strategy to improve the quality of teaching and learning, although much is yet to be done to ensure that lessons are consistently good across the college. The college's internal lesson observation process is now more rigorous, and showed that in 2005/06 the overall quality of teaching and learning was satisfactory. A more thorough diagnosis of specific strengths and areas for improvement in lessons will enable appropriate steps to be taken to tackle pockets of weaker practice, and should result in a more detailed assessment of classroom practice during the current cycle of course reviews and self-assessment. The work of the recently appointed advanced teaching practitioners has considerable potential, and is already having an impact, particularly in respect of supporting those whose lessons are judged to be unsatisfactory, and in generating discussion in the college about pedagogical practice.

According to the self-assessment report (SAR), some learners are enrolled on to inappropriate courses. What is being done to improve this? What other strategies are being used to improve retention rates?

- Effective action has been taken to improve initial advice and guidance procedures, so that learners are enrolled on to courses at the appropriate

level and therefore likely to have more chance of being successful. Clear entry criteria for each course have been identified and applied. A two-stage interview process, appropriate diagnostic assessment, and an enhanced induction period have been designed to ensure that learners are well supported, both in making their choices and during their programme.

- Curriculum changes have been made to expand the range of courses at lower levels. This is intended to help to improve retention rates by ensuring that learners do not leave courses because they find them too difficult, and also to improve progression opportunities.
- The provision of additional learning support for learners who need help is highly regarded by staff and learners. However, insufficient data are currently collected and analysed in order to evaluate the take-up, timeliness and impact of additional learning support.
- Learners are well supported on their courses, and one-to-one tutorials are effective in monitoring their progress and setting them targets for the future. Support for those learners at highest risk, provided by learning mentors, is particularly effective. Learners report that the quality and content of group tutorials is more mixed. Managers recognise that, although there is a college-wide tutorial framework, there is some lack of clarity about the extent to which it should be implemented consistently across the college.

Has any further progress been made in improving the quality of work-based learning?

- Although slow progress has been made over the last three years in improving the quality of work-based learning, appropriate action has recently been taken. The college has now put in place a clearer tracking process for learners, incorporating a traffic light system to identify issues earlier. There is a stronger focus on ensuring that all work-based learners achieve their key skills and, where appropriate, technical certificates early in the programme. Other positive recent changes include the employment of additional qualified assessors where needed. A senior manager now has responsibility for work-based learning in each faculty and the college has plans to recruit a work-based learning manager to co-ordinate apprenticeships across the college. However, it is too early to see the full impact of the changes that have been put in place.

Leadership and management

The SAR refers to a shift in emphasis from quality assurance to quality improvement. What does this entail, and what impact is it having?

- The shift in emphasis from quality assurance to quality improvement is the consequence of a recognition by senior managers that although previous quality assurance procedures were adequate they were not leading sufficiently quickly to improvements in performance. Data are now being used more accurately to identify and tackle areas of poor performance. Responsibilities for quality improvement have been appropriately restructured, and the recently appointed programme area leaders are fully aware of their accountability for performance in their areas of responsibility. These key appointments have made a good start in promoting improvements to both the quality of provision and learners' outcomes.

How rigorous are the processes for judging the grades to be awarded in the SAR?

- Grades in the SAR are awarded through a rigorous process that includes a validation panel with external representation. In broad terms the grades awarded seem to be substantiated by the evidence, although in the curriculum areas that are graded as outstanding, the evidence presented in the SAR does not place sufficient emphasis on the characteristics that, in the college's judgement, make the provision excellent.

The SAR refers to course reviews as an area for improvement. Has any progress been made in improving the quality and detail of course reviews?

- The new format for evaluating courses is clear, and the accompanying guidance is comprehensive. Over the last year, self-assessment at all levels of the college has become sharper and more evaluative. The new course reviews had not been completed at the time of the visit.

What progress has been made since the last visit in creating the "new" college and the "Academy 6" provision?

- Good progress has been made in developing plans for the new college in the town centre. Subject to the normal consents, it is expected that the new college will open in September 2009. The "Academy 6" brand has already been adopted, and a new postholder is in place to lead this development. Senior managers recognise the need to ensure that the "sixth form" provision under this brand is of the highest quality.

Any other observations from the visit not identified in the pre-visit analysis:

- Since the appointment of the new principal, the college has become more outward-looking through, for example, developing good links with other colleges, and the effective use of specialist consultants. This has helped managers and others to develop a more objective view of good practice.