

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Blackburn College

Date of visit: Wednesday 12 October 2006

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

In 2004/05 success rates for adults declined to 43%, significantly below the national average. What does college data indicate about the success rates for 2005/06?

- College data indicates that success rates for adult learners improved in 2006 by 13 percentage points to 56% which is just below the national average. The college has withdrawn its vision to learn provision and radically changed the delivery of ECDL courses; both of these had low success rates and impacted significantly on the college's overall success rate in 2005 and 2006.

In 2004/05 the success rates on short courses for learners of all ages were significantly below the national average. What strategies have the college used to improve the success rates and have they been effective?

- In 2006 changes to the delivery of short courses had a positive and significant impact on learners' success rates which are now above the national average.

In 2004/05 retention on long courses for learners aged 16-18, at 79% is around the national average but for adults, retention at 65% is significantly below. Why is there this difference? Have the college evaluated the effectiveness of the retention strategies introduced in September 2005? What does retention in 2005/06 indicate about their effectiveness?

- A wide range of strategies were introduced to improve retention in 2005/06. Overall retention of adult learners improved to 74% which is just below the national average.

Has the progression to mainstream courses improved for ESOL learners? Are more learners working towards external accreditation? How has assessment on non-accredited courses in ESOL improved?

- Almost all ESOL learners are enrolled on accredited courses. Achievement improved in 2006 but retention remains an issue.

College performance report data for 2004/05 indicates significant variations in the success rates across sector subject areas? Has the college identified underperforming courses and taken action that has impacted on results?

- The college has correctly identified underperforming courses as part of its self-assessment process. These courses have clear action plans and are closely monitored by managers at all levels in the college. The success of learners has improved in the vast majority of these courses.

What are the outcomes for learners on E2E provision?

- Outcomes on E2E provision have improved from 39% in 2003/04 to 63% in 2005/06. Progression onto apprenticeship programmes has been consistently low at 3%, although progression into further education has improved over the last three years from 17% to 41%. The college has just introduced two new E2E learning programmes. Learners initially enrol on a well designed two week introductory programme, successful completion leads to a qualification. A new link course has been introduced to provide an alternative progression route for learners.

Quality of education and training

The college lesson observation profile is improving and high. How can this be reconciled with declining success rates for adults? Do observations cover all teachers?

- The college revised its lesson observation process in 2005/06 and have plans for further improvements during this academic year. A larger and more representative sample of staff were observed in 2005/06 and the profile of grades is closer to that observed by inspectors at the last inspection. All managers have received additional lesson observation training and have carried out a review of the strengths and areas for development in their curriculum area. The outcomes of the lesson observations have not yet been fully used to share good practice or provide additional training.

What impact has sharing good practice and staff development had on the quality of teaching and learning? How is the college addressing the less effective teaching observed in the quality assurance process?

- The college has invested heavily in staff training to improve the quality of teaching and learning. However, the proportion of unsatisfactory teaching remains the same as at the last inspection. Less effective teaching is tackled rigorously. Teachers who receive an unsatisfactory grade are well supported by their manager and closely monitored. Good practice is shared within curriculum areas but there is no mechanism for the consistent sharing of good practice in teaching and learning across the college.

What aspects of guidance and support have improved since the last inspection? What has the college done to improve areas such as the consistency of tutorials and monitoring the impact of additional learning support?

- Improvements in guidance and support have been one of the college's key strategies to improve retention. Pre-enrolment guidance and entry criteria have been enhanced to get learners onto the right course from the start. A revised tutorial programme has a strong emphasis on covering the Every Child Matters themes. All learners have an individual learning plan and regular one to one meetings with their tutor to discuss their progress and targets. The college recognises that target-setting is not yet consistently applied rigorously across all courses. Learners feel well supported in this inclusive college. Learning support, guidance staff and personal tutors work well together and monitor the impact of their services, including the views of stakeholders.

What steps have been taken to further improve the quality and consistency of work-based learning (WBL) provision?

- The management of work-based learning has improved further; delivery teams have been restructured to improve the coherence in managing the components of the framework. Learners' progress is more closely monitored at monthly work-based learning management meetings. The changes introduced have resulted in more sharing of good practice across vocational areas. However, some vocational areas have been slower to adopt effective improvement strategies, for example, the traffic light system.
- Overall framework success rates compare well with national rates and improved from 63% in 2003/04 to 69% in 2005/06. Timely success rates have remained above the national timely success rates but have declined over the last three years. There are still significant variations in the success of apprentices across curriculum areas. Learners are positive about their off the job training in the college and their relationship with supportive staff.

Have the strategies to embed key skills been effective? Has the quality of teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy improved? Have pass rates on key skills courses (particularly at level 3) improved?

- A designated key skills tutor has provided valuable support to effectively integrate key skills in each vocational course and raise standards. A substantial programme of staff development and one-to-one support has raised the profile of key skills. The college has improved its information technology infrastructure and on-line testing is available to all learners. Early data for 2005/06 indicates that success rates in key skills have improved significantly at level 1, but not at levels 2 and 3.

Leadership and management

Have college managers evaluated the impact of strategies introduced in 2005/06?

- The impact of new strategies is closely monitored and well supported by timely and reliable management information. For example, as a result of revised attendance monitoring, the colleges overall attendance increased by 2% in 2005/06. Managers evaluate their action plans three times a year, targets and areas of responsibility are clearly identified. The self-assessment process has been moved forward to provide more prompt action to remedy weaknesses.

Are college managers clear about the priorities for further improvement?

- The college and staff are self-critical and are very focussed on raising standards and improving the learners' experiences. A new vision has been established 'working as a team to be outstanding' and is supported throughout the organisation. Middle managers have undertaken additional training; they are now accountable for their results, are clear about their responsibilities and feel empowered to make changes.

Have the college revised its safeguarding children procedures in line with the new guidelines?

- Appropriate policies and procedures have been established to ensure that arrangements for safeguarding children meet the new guidelines. The child protection policy was updated in August 2006. The college has a single central record which shows the recruitment and vetting checks undertaken relating to staff identity, qualifications and criminal records. CRB checks are undertaken for all staff appointed to work with young people. Subcontractors confirm that appropriate checks on staff working at the college have been undertaken. Staff and governors have received training in the new child protection arrangements and further training is planned. Staff who teach pupils aged 14 to 16 have received additional training.