

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: South East Essex College of Arts and Technology

Date of visit: 31 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

Current college performance and standards in long courses, work-based learning and key skills

- College data for 2005/06 show many areas of improvement with success rates at or above national averages. Retention rates for adult learners at levels 2 and 3 have improved sharply and now stand at or above national averages. The significant decline in adult retention rates at level 1 have been heavily influenced by factors beyond the college's control including the closure of community centres where IT courses were delivered.
- Success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 at levels 2 and 3 in 2005/06 have risen to significantly above national averages. Pass rates at these levels are outstanding at approximately 15 percentage points above national averages with retention at the national average. At level 3, success rates are rising and in 2005/06, college data show them to be slightly above the national average. Again, pass rates are outstanding at 92% compared to the national average of 84%. However, retention is slightly below the national average at 77%.
- Success rates for apprenticeship programmes as part of the NOVA partnership in work-based learning are still low but have improved from 36% in 2004/05 to 48% in 2005/06. On Entry to Employment programmes in 2005/06 the number of learners progressing successfully to further education, training or employment has improved from 47% in 2004/05 to 54%. This is still below the national average of 60 per cent.
- Concerns over the poor success rates in 2004/05 for health and social care courses have been resolved. The low success rates were largely due to the poor performance of a 'profit from learning' programme with large

numbers of learners and too few assessors available to support learners. Many learners did not meet their achievement targets or left the training programme early. The college identified the issue and gave students the option of unit accreditation for what they had achieved or the opportunity to continue their training outside their funding period. More realistic goals have been set in relation to a recent Train to Gain contract, the successor to profit from learning. There are no health and social care learners included in the new contract.

- Key skills success rates remain low at 23% but have improved from 7% in 2004/05. Success rates for the wider key skills of improving own learning and problem solving offered in two schools are significantly higher at 77%. Managers have introduced a range of good initiatives to raise awareness of key skill programmes, including establishing initial diagnostic testing. The college continues to work hard in developing this area of under-performance and a range of staff training and development activities have been run. Support for staff in designing assignments that better match vocational or academic activities has been introduced. A designated space for key skills staff has been established and resources increased.

Quality of education and training

The effectiveness of lesson observation in raising the standards of teaching and learning

- The college's lesson observation system is well established and supported throughout the college. The new lesson observation form provides useful data for the college to analyse specific aspects of teaching and learning including any disparities between the quality of lessons for different age groups. In the few examples examined, comments and judgements provided a good focus on learning and learners' progress and supported the accuracy of the grade given. The college has provided observers with a good range of training to enhance consistency and written observations are well monitored by the quality team. Rapid action has been taken to support staff whose lessons were graded less than satisfactory and in most cases this has been successful in raising standards to satisfactory.
- In 2005/06 the college did not meet its target of observing every member of the teaching staff with 80% of full-time teachers observed and 71% of

part-time teachers observed. The proportion of lessons graded good or better by the college has fallen slightly from the 2004/05 total but this outcome does not represent the full range of experienced teachers in the college as observations concentrated on new and inexperienced staff. The college has recognised the need for fully comprehensive observation to identify fully the quality of teaching and learning and has plans in place to address this issue. Current written observations do not identify clearly enough the training needs of staff. Lesson observation is linked explicitly to appraisal; however, there is insufficient alignment and scheduling of lesson observation, staff development and appraisal.

Adult recruitment, guidance and retention

- A range of useful initiatives have been introduced to improve adult learner retention rates, including effective initial screening for literacy and numeracy support, leading to diagnostic testing. Better information is given to learners at the start of their courses, with clear guidance on expectations, study support available and pastoral care. A programme manager for adults with responsibility for improving the adult experience has been appointed. A new system to identify learners at risk of leaving has been developed. This involves identifying academic concerns as well as additional learning support or pastoral needs. Student support services maintain a close relationship with tutors to devise the best support strategies for learners who need this. A new computerised record system and review process helps student support services and tutors to monitor learner support needs.

Employer Engagement

- Employer engagement remains a strength and the college now contracts with around 76 different employers. Useful and well established partnerships have been maintained and further relationships forged with both local and regional employers. A useful customer relations management (CRM) system has been developed to record employer engagement activities and to enable further initiatives to meet effectively the skills development needs of employers. Communication with employers continues to be well co-ordinated and managed within the college. The Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in ICT and media are maintaining good links with employers. An employer engagement action plan has been

developed and the college is working towards the new standard for employer responsiveness and vocational excellence.

Leadership and management

The management of work-based learning

- The college's role in managing the NOVA Partnership in work-based learning, is very effective. Good, clear guidance for inclusion in the partnership has been established and partnership membership has increased. Partnership members meet quarterly and good practice is now shared effectively. Quality assurance arrangements are well established and include observation of teaching and learning. Support activities, staff development, training and capacity building initiatives are provided for participant organisations. Performance is monitored closely and appropriate targets for qualification completions are set. Contract agreements are re-negotiated and amended when necessary. Strengths of the partnership include its ability to attract additional funding for specific projects and the advice, guidance and support it offers members.

The rigour and accuracy of self assessment

- The self assessment process is well embedded, timely and built coherently from individual course reviews. The review of grades awarded is rigorous and based on good quality data and evidence. A few programme self assessment reports rely too heavily on pass rates with insufficient attention given to the impact of retention rates.

Overall impact of leadership and management

- The principal and senior managers continue to provide open and consultative management that has been successful in raising standards and achievement. Senior managers have a clear understanding of college policies that they feel have been subject to a genuinely consultative process. Target setting has been improved through training but remains an area for further development.
- The centrality of improving teaching and learning in order to raise standards is well understood and supported by managers. Improvements

to teaching and learning strategies are illustrated in curriculum areas but are not as yet supported by the overall college grading of good or better teaching and learning.