

## ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: West Thames  
Date of visit: 18 October 2006

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit. It focuses on the issues explored during the visit and does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the college's performance.

### Achievement and standards

To what extent has the college maintained its steady rise in overall success rates? What does initial analysis of 2005/06 data indicate?

- In the three years up to 2004/05, overall success rates rose steadily. The pattern of improvement was particularly evident on long courses, for both learners aged 16-18 and adults. Success rates for entry and level 1 programmes, which form a significant proportion of the college's work, were above national averages. At the time of the visit, not all 2005/06 results were available. The majority of those unknown fall within the sector subject area (SSA) 14, 'preparation for life and work'. Using the college's data, the overall success rate for 2005/06 for those programmes where success rates are available, is around 78%. This is slightly higher than the previous year but, as noted above, excludes many success rates for one SSA. The success rate of 78% reflects overall improvements across almost all SSAs. The only area with a significant decline is leisure, travel and tourism, which has relatively few learners and, in 2005/06, had no full-time provision.
- The college's GCSE offer has been amended, as too few students were gaining 5 passes at grades A\*-C. Instead of three GCSE pathways, there is now just one GCSE pathway in science with English as a second language, and also first diplomas in business, health and care and science. To address the issue of poor success rates for AS science, a BTEC national diploma in science is offered. With this programme available, in addition to the AS, students are guided more carefully on to the most appropriate route. Success rates in science and

mathematics improved to 67% in 2005/06 from 62% in 2004/05.

- Success rates in work-based learning have been very low, but have risen sharply in the last year. The hairdressing success rate for 2005/06 was 33% at the time of the visit, but is expected to reach 52% when records are reconciled later this month. Timely achievement is also improving, as is progression from E2E programmes.

At this early stage in the academic year, to what extent, if any, are attendance and punctuality problematic?

- Early indications suggest that punctuality and attendance have improved this year. Measures introduced in 2005/06 include a reward scheme, retention officers, punctuality patrols and a revised disciplinary code. The number of parents' evenings has been increased to include a meeting early in the year to emphasise students' responsibilities and to introduce tutors. Handbooks for parents give contact details for staff. Systems for managing punctuality and attendance have been simplified this year, but there is some inconsistency in how they are applied across different curriculum areas.

## Quality of provision

How effective is the lesson observation system? To what extent have initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and learning, through the creation of the Learning and Development Team, had an impact on students' achievements?

- The college's internal observation system indicates an improving trend in the quality of teaching and learning. The proportion of teaching judged to be outstanding rose significantly to 20% in 2005/06 from 5% the year before. The proportion of unsatisfactory teaching declined from 5% in 2004/05 to around 4% in 2005/06. The college target of having less than 5% unsatisfactory teaching last year was met. Most of the outstanding teaching is within foundation programmes. This is linked to a drive to improve teaching and learning at this level and is reflected, to a large degree, in improving success rates for learners on foundation programmes.

- This year, all graded observations are due to take place in the spring term within a set time period, as would be the case for an inspection. In the autumn term, the focus is on providing teachers with support, in a range of different ways. The learning and development team (LDT) has been proactive in driving forward improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. As well being involved in the graded lesson observations, they work effectively with individual teachers to provide coaching, 'soft observations' and other forms of support. Those teachers who access the support complete an initial self-assessment which identifies areas of strengths and areas where they have limited knowledge and/or experience. The self-assessment also gives them an opportunity to discuss their preferred method of support, e.g. through coaching, shadowing, co-teaching or attendance at a workshop or course and, where possible, this is provided. Peer observations are providing opportunities within a number of curriculum teams to share good practice.
  
- There is a greater focus this year on working with whole curriculum teams and also on using information and learning technologies (ILT), and less emphasis on drop-in workshops. Other developments include recently appointed Skills for Life 'champions' helping teachers to embed literacy, numeracy and language within curriculum areas. Staff identify a changing culture whereby teachers are becoming more reflective and evaluative about their work and that many more are approaching the LDT for support than in the previous year. The challenge now, with the college's approach to 'going for gold', is to improve the 34% of satisfactory teaching and continue to reduce the small proportion of unsatisfactory teaching.

What impact is the college's drive to improve employer responsiveness having on learners' experience?

- The employer engagement officer, appointed in January 2006, has developed new contacts and marketing materials. Successful employer events, such as training on new legislation, have attracted employers to work with the college and to send their staff for training. The college welcomes other local organisations to use its facilities. Productive partnerships with other organisations are helping to develop good progression routes for vocational learners at the Skills Centre. Work

experience has increased for most curriculum areas, although it remains problematic for lower level information and communication technology learners. Training for public bodies such as the National Health Service and the police force develops working relationships that are benefiting young students. Some European Social Fund projects are helping women to enhance their vocational skills to enter the work place. However, funding body delays have meant that the Train to Gain programme has been slow to start. Information about employer contacts is recorded but not yet well co-ordinated. Therefore, although employers visit the college and students attend work related events, this information cannot yet be shared effectively across the college. The college collects employers' opinions regularly but is not yet able to use the information in a systematic way as it is not routinely analysed.

## Leadership and management

To what extent is there more consistency this year in terms of the quality of course review documents, self-assessment and action plans across different curriculum areas?

- Course review and evaluation (CRE) documents examined are more consistent in terms of quality than those reviewed at the last annual assessment visit. The CRE documents highlight strengths and weaknesses and clearly identify the evidence base for judgements, drawing on college data, where appropriate. They do not routinely identify, or comment on, trend analysis. Action plans are appropriate and include measurable outcomes, along with target dates and responsibilities. CRE documents had been moderated by the time of the visit. Moderation is undertaken in different ways, depending on the programme or curriculum area. These CREs feed into the self-assessment process, which is due for completion later this term.

To what extent have initiatives, such as the Friday afternoon drop-in ILT workshops and virtual learning environment (VLE) developments, impacted on teachers' use of ILT and students' learning?

- Good progress has been made in improving equipment and facilities. Most staff and students now have access to ILT in

lessons and can log on to the network from home. It is too early to judge the impact of recent initiatives and developments on students' learning. However, this year, e-learning 'champions' in curriculum areas are promoting enthusiastically a wide range of applications and interactive learning. They meet regularly to share ideas and monitor progress. A recently appointed ILT Director has negotiated clear targets with each of them. 'Moodle', a VLE, is being piloted to replace previous systems and the intention is that it will be available to students in some curriculum areas later in the autumn term. ILT training is being cascaded gradually but not all staff have taken advantage of it and some rooms do not have access to computers.