

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Somerset College of Arts and Technology
Date of visit: 4 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

2005/06 success rates on long courses at levels 1 to 3

- Achievement data have not yet all been fully incorporated; inspectors consider that the college has taken an appropriately cautious view of the likely out-turn.
- Success rates at level 2 for 16 to 18 year olds and levels 2 and 3 for adults had been of concern, although level 2 had been showing improvement from a low base. In 2005/06 the upward trend in improvement noted at the last annual assessment visit has been maintained. Interim performance data indicate that overall success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 and for adult learners will be above the national averages.
- Interim performance data indicate that success rates at levels 1 and 2 for 16 to 18 year old learners will be above national average and for level 3 at the average; success rates for adult learners at levels 1 to 3 will be above average.

Key skills success rates for 16 to 18 year old learners

- The college has maintained the improvement in key skills success rates seen at the last visit. These were either at or above national averages for 16 to 18 year old learners in 2004/05 at each level. Interim performance in 2005/06 indicates that success rates will be above the national averages for 2004/05 at each level.

How much progress are students making? Usage of value added (VA) and distance travelled (DT) data

- The college has withdrawn from AS level provision from September 2006 and will withdraw from GCE A levels fully by the end of this current academic year. Therefore inspectors did not pursue the use being made of value added data for AS and A level provision.
- Having taken part in the trials, the college to date has not found the Learner Achievement Tracker a useful tool to predict and monitor learners'

performance. The college has concerns with the tendency to average-ness and the partial coverage of learner numbers seen in the currently pilot VA and DT data in the iCPR.

Work-based learning (WBL) performance in 2005/06

- Success rates in work-based learning during 2005/06 are not yet final and so indicative information from the LSC Provider Gateway up to period 12 was used as the basis for judgements. Inspectors are aware that whilst the college recognises the published success rates, the Gateway data provides a transitional view of the college's true position following improvements in reporting.
- Indicative WBL success rates for 2005/06 are generally low, and below the provisional national averages for the same period. The provisional 2005/06 overall success rate, at some 43%, is well below the colleges target of 60%. Overall learner retention, based on data provided by the college, has improved from 64% in 2004/05, to 72% in 2005/06.

Quality of education and training

Lesson observations

- At the time of the last visit inspectors judged that the teaching and learning observation process would enable the college to have an accurate and realistic picture of its strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning. Since then managers have further refined the process to improve the quality and usefulness of judgements and feedback to teachers. Managers now ensure that each substantive teacher is observed during each academic year.

The impact of staff development on teaching and learning

- The measurement of the impact of staff development on the quality of teaching and learning has been developing. The process of informing staff development from lesson observation and personal development review is robust. The evaluation of training is thorough. Managers have identified measures from their key performance indicators to facilitate evaluation of the effectiveness of staff development in the longer term. These measures include learner satisfaction results, judgements from repeat lesson observations, attendance and success rates.

Individual learning plans (ILPs)

- The college has been using a paper-based ILP for two years which has gone through a process of continuous improvement. The ILP successfully

combines the academic and pastoral aspects of the student experience. Key aspects in its success are weekly team meetings, the integration of support staff with academic staff and the student review boards. Plans to develop an electronic ILP are progressing well towards a pilot launch in September 2007.

Leadership and management

The quality of self-assessment

- The self-assessment process is robust and managers use self assessment well as a quality improvement tool. The college has decided to retain the self-assessment report (SAR) structure according to subject sector areas (SSA) to enable more direct comparison with data in the iCPR. Managers have completed a thorough and final review of the quality improvement plan from the last SAR and have made good progress with self assessment for the 2005/06 academic year.

Continuing improvement in success rates

- The last annual assessment visit found that the college had improved its success rates through a number of measures including the re-structuring of its provision, re-shaping its management structure, ensuring greater focus on the use of data and re-focusing on the learner at the centre of activities. The college was continuing to take appropriate measures to further raise success rates and interim data show that this improvement has been sustained. However, there is scope for further improvement. Managers use data well to drive improvement, and the provision of these data is now more timely and appropriate to managers' needs. The rationalisation of additional qualifications and the introduction of 'Steps for Success' (a range of level 1 programmes) have also contributed to the improvement in success rates. The decision to withdraw from GCE A-level provision is providing a renewed strategic focus on vocational education and training.

Leadership and management of work-based learning

- Since the last visit the college has appointed a WBL manager. Good progress has been made in evaluating the provision and improving data and operational management. The management of WBL has improved with better communication and monitoring. Appropriate arrangements are now in place to increase the college's capacity to improve the provision. It is, however, too early to judge the effectiveness of these actions.
- The college has recognised that its low success rates in framework achievements have resulted from the poor management of key skills,

together with insufficient initial advice and guidance and attention to the pastoral and social needs of some learners. Appropriate action has been taken to front-load the delivery of key skills into the early part of apprenticeship learning and introduce on-line assessment. Where this is in place success rates have improved. Learners appreciate the flexible access to testing, and the immediate availability of results. The college reports an improvement in access to initial advice in guidance. Initial vocational skills testing has recently been introduced in hairdressing. The college now recognises the financial support available for supporting learners with additional socio-economic needs, and is increasing its activity with this group. It is, again, too early to judge the full value of these arrangements.

- There has been some progress in improving feedback from WBL employers. Historically, the rate of return from questionnaires was very low, and the college has sought to address this. In 2005/06 assessors directly managed the completion of questionnaires with some 19 employers. The information collected is used, together with the wide range of intelligence collected by assessors as they visit learners in the workplace, to inform divisional self assessment.
- In 2005/06 the college fell well short of meeting its WBL target with the LSC of a 70% success rate. For 2006/07, the college has agreed a success rate target of some 78%. This will be particularly challenging, but managers are confident that, with the improvements in place, it can be achieved. This will be assessed on future visits

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

- Detailed consideration of the college's joint venture with Wiltshire College, delivering WBL with the Ministry of Defence, is beyond the scope of this visit. Inspectors were, however, made aware of the development that has taken place. Currently over 2000 learners are being supported and appropriate progression routes have been identified, particularly for management learners, in to the college's Higher Education provision.