



Birkenhead Sixth Form College

Re-inspection report

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Introduction

Birkenhead Sixth Form College was inspected in March 2005. Inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) carried out the inspection under Section 62 of the Learning and Skills Act. The quality of provision was found to be satisfactory or better in all areas inspected, except in science and mathematics which was found to be less than satisfactory. Ofsted is responsible for re-inspecting all provision that is less than satisfactory within two years of the original inspection. If inadequate areas of learning or aspects of provision remain inadequate following re-inspection, inspectors will continue to monitor progress at annual assessment visits, but the areas will not be re-graded. They will be re-inspected during the full college inspection.

The less than satisfactory curriculum area was re-inspected on 13 and 14 March 2007. The outcomes of the re-inspection are as follows.

Curriculum area	Original grade	Re-inspection grade
Science and mathematics	4	3

Context

The college offers GCSE, AS and A levels in biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, further mathematics applied science, GCSE science and a range of City and Guilds numeracy qualifications. Currently there are 673 full-time learner enrolments, with 484 studying on AS and A level courses.

Strengths

- high success rates in A level sciences and mathematics
- good proportion of high grades in GCSE mathematics
- good working ethos in lessons
- strong individual support to motivate learners to meet target grades

Areas for improvement

- low pass rates and low proportion of high grades in AS level chemistry and mathematics
- low success rates in GCSE science
- insufficient challenge for more able learners in some lessons

Achievement and standards

Achievements and standards in science and mathematics have improved since the previous inspection and are now satisfactory. GCE A level success rates, pass rates and numbers of learners achieving high grades have improved and are now at or above the high national averages for sixth form colleges. AS level physics and biology have improved to around national averages. While

there has been some improvement in AS chemistry and mathematics, pass rates and the proportion of learners achieving high grades remain well below average. The proportion of learners achieving A* to C grades in GCSE mathematics has steadily improved and is high. Success rates and the achievement of high grades for GCSE science have been well below national averages for the last three years. In September 2006 the college introduced a more appropriate GCSE science course and the quality of learners work on this programme is now good.

Quality of provision

The quality of the provision is satisfactory. Overall, teaching and learning is satisfactory and improving. Many learners work very well in lessons and enjoy the productive working ethos facilitated by teachers. Teachers are attentive to ensure all learners understand the work however there is insufficient emphasis on challenging the more able learners or encouraging learners to articulate their thoughts clearly. Subsequently, some learners are not achieving their full potential. Learners are given strong individual support to achieve their target grades which they value and find motivational. In some cases subject induction in AS mathematics does not inform learners support needs accurately enough.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory. New specifications, extra support lessons and improved schemes of work are all beginning to make an impact. There is greater sharing of good practice between teachers. Subject self-assessment reports are realistic however they do not identify characteristics of good or weak teaching and learning sufficiently to inform further development.

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Birkenhead Sixth Form College
Date of visit: 13 and 14 March 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

College data and self-assessment report for 2005/06 show high and above average overall success rates for levels 1 and 2 respectively, but at level 3 the success rate remained low. What does current in-year retention data suggest, particularly at level 3 and on AS programmes?

- The college's overall in-year retention data show a marginal increase compared with the same point last year. This slight upward trend is also reflected for those learners enrolled on to level 3 programmes - the college's largest proportion of full-time enrolments. On both AS and A2 courses, in-year retention rates have improved by around 1% on last years figures.
- In September 2006 a full-time attendance officer was appointed to help support the retention strategy. In addition, the newly introduced 'BSFC Expects' (Birkenhead Sixth Form College Expects) initiative, produced in conjunction with learners, clearly outlines the college's expectations of teachers and learners attitudes to study, punctuality and attendance. Attendance on both AS and A2 courses has improved and was good at the time of the annual assessment visit.
- The college's self-assessment report recognises retention is still an area for improvement, particularly on AS courses. Further strategies around admissions and enrolment are being developed for September 2007 to ensure learners are placed on the right courses.
- The proportion of learners identified as needing support and then receiving it has increased further this year from 76% to 85%. Retention rates for these learners are in line with that of the whole college. As yet, the college does not systematically measure the impact of additional learning support in order to gauge its full effectiveness.

A year on, what impact has the college's 'Success Strategy' had in raising learners' value added scores, particularly on those courses where learners were consistently not meeting their expected grades?

- The success of the college's 'Success Strategy' has been mixed and did not have the anticipated impact expected on learners' achievement in 2005/06. From September 2006 this was replaced with a cross college 'Achievement Strategy' which is much more focused on teaching and learning, gives increased accountability to managers and teachers and has more measurable outcomes by which to judge progress. This strategy document is reviewed more regularly than its predecessor and curriculum leaders report they are finding it much easier to implement.
- In 2005/06 value added data shows many learners broadly made their expected progress at A2 level but overall progress on AS courses declined from the previous year and a high proportion of learners did not meet their expected grades.
- Actions taken within some subjects to improve learners' value-added scores have had a positive impact. For example in AS psychology there is a four year improving trend, with a large number of learners now making at least the progress expected of them. However, in several subjects, actions taken to improve have failed to raise value-added standards sufficiently.
- From September 2006, a stronger emphasis has been given to the use of target minimum grades (TMGs) to support learners to achieve their potential. There is now greater consistency in the use of TMGs by teachers and learners have found this regular revisiting of targets, particularly linked to assessment feedback, more motivational than in previous years.
- It was too early at the time of the AAV to judge the full impact of the college's achievement strategy on learners' overall achievements and standards. However there are early indications that there is now a more consistent whole college approach and initial 2006/07 exam results are showing some improvement.

Quality of education and training

What progress has been made in improving accommodation identified at the last AAV, and due for completion in September 2006?

- Very good progress has been made in improving the accommodation identified at the last AAV. Major refurbishment of building work was completed for the 2006/07 academic year. Much accommodation for sports and recreation and for drama is now good. Information learning technology (ILT) resources remain good across the college. A revised property strategy identifies refurbishment of the refectory and addressing some smaller classroom space as its next priority.

How effectively is the college moving forward the Every Child Matters agenda?

- Good progress has been made in taking forward the five themes that ensure every child matters. The self-assessment report outlines evidence for promoting healthy lifestyles, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and ensuring economic well being although it does not yet grade the quality of each theme.
- Learners are encouraged to maintain healthy lifestyles through a broad tutorial programme. Healthy eating has been improved by changes to the arrangements for college catering from January 2007. This has led to a wider range of healthy fresh food options, including a popular pasta bar and since its introduction turnover in the refectory has increased by 30%. A good range of sports activities is available, although not all are based at the college. These along with other enrichment activities are promoted well with activities split into categories such as 'healthy body and mind' and 'fun, interest and personal improvement' to clearly highlight health and educational themes. The college is currently working with the local Health Education Unit to signpost learners' individual health needs so it can provide more bespoke targeting and promotion of healthy lifestyles through tutorial and enrichment.
- Learners feel safe in and around the college. Enhanced CCTV cameras have been fitted to all external buildings. There are clear safe guarding procedures and it is mandatory for all staff to have enhanced CRB checks before working at the college. A central record is in place which follows national safeguarding guidelines. Comprehensive health and safety procedures are in place to cater for learners undertaking work experience.

This is significant as the number of learners undertaking organised work experience has increased from 150 to 269 over the last three years.

- All learners are encouraged to make a positive contribution. A long running community project helps arrange placements for learners to support their local community, for example placements working with the elderly or in centres for the blind. There are also good opportunities for learners to arrange their own voluntary work to achieve the Millennium Volunteer award. The numbers of learners involved in both community and voluntary work has increased since 2005 by over 30% with over 140 learners involved in projects this academic year. A significant number of learners have taken accredited programmes including first aid and basic food hygiene.

Leadership and management

How effectively are leaders and managers tackling underperformance, particularly the low success rates on a number of AS courses and the low achievement of high grades outlined in the self-assessment report?

- A number of strategies have been implemented to improve success rates and high grades on AS courses across the college. To date however, these have met with mixed success with success rates for AS courses remaining below the national average at 71% in 2005/06.
- More recent initiatives to support improvement, outlined within the college's 'Achievement Strategy' are in some cases, showing early signs of improvement. Heads of subject are now held more accountable for underperformance in their curriculum areas and agreed course targets are reviewed regularly in conjunction with senior managers. There is increased sharing of good practice amongst subjects, enabling managers to exchange ideas regarding their approaches to raising learners' achievement. Some early modular exams results have improved this year.

How effective are the college's quality assurance systems in improving the overall quality of teaching and learning? How well is it addressing any pockets of inconsistent practice?

- The college has increased its focus on teaching and learning. Some subject teams are now working more closely together and the pairing of subject teams has been a feature of recent whole college training and development days. The good practice data base, introduced in 2005, is

accessed more widely by teachers although a formal evaluation of its use and impact is not planned until the end of this academic year.

- Peer observations have continued to expand and there is good support given to individual teachers where further improvement in teaching and learning is identified. Regular moderation of teaching and learning observation outcomes is now undertaken by the senior quality manager. At present the college have over 20 observers who generally observe within their own curriculum area. Joint observations between subjects are being considered for 2007/08 to strengthen the consistency of grading.
- It was not possible during this AAV to determine the full impact of these quality assurance measures on whole college teaching and learning. However, the college's most recent lesson observation grade profile indicates an increasing proportion of lessons are now graded good or better.

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

- A new principal was appointed in September 2006. The principal along with senior managers have reviewed their immediate priorities for the college over the forthcoming year. This transition of leadership has been effectively managed. Both staff and students have appreciated the open and supportive leadership style that has been promoted in this recent time of change.