ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Newcastle-under-Lyme College
Date of visit: 25 January 2007

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit (AAV). 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

What judgements can be made about the college's performance in 2005/06 and current trends?

- The overall college success rate improved by one percentage point in 2005/06 from 78% to 79%. The more significant long course success rate similarly improved from 72%, which had placed the college firmly in the top 10% of general further education/tertiary colleges based on long course success rate performance, to 73%. The short course success rate improved slightly and remains around the national average. There were several fluctuations within this continuing trend of improvement. For students aged 16 to 18, success rates declined by two percentage points on level 1 long courses; by eight points on level 2 long courses and on short courses. For students aged 19+, the long course success rate declined at level 3 by two percentage points. On the other hand, the long course success rate at level 3 for students aged 16 to 18, which reflects almost three-quarters the college's provision, improved by one percentage point. Success rates for students aged 19+ improved by five percentage points at level 1, by six percentage points at level 2 and on short courses. Long course success rates for students aged 16 to 18 are currently 9% higher than the 2004/05 national averages at all 3 levels and for older students they are between 10% and 13% higher than those averages.

- There was a slight decline in retention for students aged 16 to 18 last year, mostly due a fall at level 2 which the college has subsequently been vigorously addressing. As a result of actions taken, autumn term attendance of full-time students shows improvement from 85% in each of the last two years to 88% this year. Achievement rates in 2005/06 were very similar to the previous year for both age groups and remain high. The college is keenly focused on trying to increase the proportion of students who achieve higher grades, particularly in the sixth form centre.

- Performance across GCE AS and A-level courses was also broadly the same as in the previous year and success rates remain above national averages for both types of course. The average points score per A-level student has improved steadily over the last three years from 178 in 2003/04 to 209 in 2005/06.

- Students from minority ethnic groups performed very strongly on advanced level courses in 2005/06, but not as well on courses at level 1 and 2, where their retention was an issue.

What judgements can be made about achievements by work-based learners? How successfully is the college addressing those areas of work-based learning (WBL) with lower success rates?

- Responsiveness to the needs of employers has led to the college increasing the size of its WBL programmes in business administration, engineering, hairdressing, beauty therapy and care. It also plans to provide apprenticeships in the newly-developed construction area. The college has successfully managed substantial growth in work-based learner numbers of some 42%. There are currently 316 work-based learners who are making good and timely progress in most curriculum areas. The college enjoys good relationships with a large number of employers, who value work-based learning and support their apprentices well. An increased number of assessors provide timely and effective assessment. They have a very good understanding of performance criteria, the technical certificates and the key skills, and use all available opportunities to help learners develop skills and gather portfolio evidence.

- Success rates continue to be good and the college has improved levels of achievement in those curriculum areas which were not performing as strongly as others. For advanced apprenticeships, apprenticeships and NVQs, college success rates are higher than the national averages by 18%, 10% and 25% respectively. In the most recently established WBL area of care, the success rate is 56%, six points above the national level. In engineering, where the college has substantial numbers, success rates for advanced apprenticeships and apprenticeships improved from the previous year by 29% and 30% respectively. The success rates for hairdressing and retail apprenticeships are now very good at 70%, both around 20% above the national level. Success rates in business administration are satisfactory. They are above the national level, but have shown a greater degree of variability. The college has identified causal factors and put in place a robust action plan to deal with them.

Quality of education and training

From evidence available, how well do teachers plan lessons to meet the needs of students across the ability range?

- Schemes of work and lesson plans demonstrate that teachers have a good awareness of the value of differentiation and the various forms it can take. Most teachers identify differentiated learning objectives in their lesson plans and students confirm that these are systematically shared at the start of lessons. The use of extension activities to ensure that more able students are sufficiently challenged is practised regularly in some subjects but not at all in others, and even in subjects where students have become accustomed to completing extension activities they feel they are not being assessed.

- Where learning support assistants are used, their deployment is usually mapped into lesson plans. The large majority of lesson plans are sufficiently detailed to enable another subject specialist to cover the lesson if necessary. Lesson plans indicate that a good range of student activities are used in lessons. Feedback from students indicates that the responsiveness of teachers and learning support assistants to specific individual needs within lessons is very good.

- There are several areas for further development. Differentiated learning objectives are not yet properly embedded into the student activity outlined in learning plans. Schemes of work and lesson plans rarely indicate how well matched activities are to the preferred learning styles of the group of students. Lesson plans do not require teachers to link learning to assessment, so where this is explicit it is due to the individual teacher's initiative. There is very limited evidence of the quality of lessons being evaluated, although teachers do usually check whether the desired learning outcomes have been achieved. Students report that they have no experience of being involved in evaluation at the end of lessons.

How well is information and learning technology (ILT) used to enhance the learning experience for students?

- The college has promoted the use of ILT within teaching and learning quite strongly over the last 12 to 18 months. However, only about 20 classrooms have fixed data projectors and interactive white boards, which are supplemented by about 12 mobile kits. Teachers have grown in confidence in their use of data projectors to present video and other stimulus material and to link to the internet. They are less confident in using the interactive white boards and subsequently these are little used.

- The Moodle virtual learning environment is used very effectively across most subjects. This resource is highly valued by teachers and students. In a good number of subjects an extensive range of course and learning materials are available, together with assessment opportunities and links to useful web sites. Students make good use of Moodle in college and at home and would like to see even more material made available in this way.

How effective a contribution does the college make to extending vocational learning opportunities for students aged 14 to 16 in the locality?

- The college makes a substantial contribution to extending the learning opportunities of students aged 14 to 16 in Newcastle and the surrounding area. For example, in the current year, 94 learners are attending on a full-time basis and a further 496 learners from 13 schools are attending the college on a part-time basis. The provision for this age group is well managed and the learners are provided with appropriate challenge and support. The large majority of full-time 14 to 16 year olds are at risk of exclusion or joining those not in education, employment or training (NEET). They make very good progress and many subsequently continue in learning at the college or enter employment. Success rates of learners on vocational GCSEs are good for these students, at 52% overall. The college has deservedly established a high profile and strong reputation in the locality for its work with the 14 to 16 age group.

What measures are in place to ensure that students have a positive and worthwhile tutorial experience?

- Group tutorials are well planned and cover a broad range of relevant topics that help learners settle into their studies rapidly. Tutors have been well supported by a range of good staff development initiatives. They have good access to a wide variety of learning resources, including a comprehensive online support manual. Individual tutors and team leaders adapt the standard tutorial programme to better meet the needs of their learners. Regular improvements are made to the effectiveness of the tutorials. Attendance at group tutorials is good and closely monitored.

- All full-time students have an entitlement to at least three individual tutorials in a year. There are some inconsistencies in their implementation. Barriers to learning are not identified or recorded and little use is made of the analysis of the preferred learning style of each student. In some cases targets, which tutors often prefer to set in the second term when they know students better, are given rather than negotiated and are not specific enough to be helpful. This discourages some learners from taking ownership of their targets. Many tutors simply replicate the targets generated by the value-added database which do not necessarily challenge all learners sufficiently.

Leadership and management

Does the college have good procedures for obtaining feedback from students? Do students' views influence college developments appropriately?

- Learners are effectively involved in providing feedback on their experience at various stages of their learning journey. The channels used include student questionnaires, focus groups, such as the one for students with learning difficulties and disabilities that is facilitated by the learning managers, student council lunches with the senior management team, course reviews and the system of student representatives. The college takes prompt and effective action to make changes when the case is well made. College managers communicate the improvements very effectively through a variety of avenues, including "you asked and we did" posters through out the college. Student representatives make good use of their skills to influence the corporation. Inspectors were given plenty of evidence of substantial improvements made by the college and where desired changes are not currently possible due to some inadequate accommodation.

How effective is the college's self assessment against the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda?

- The current self assessment essentially provides an evaluation of the efforts made by the college to support young people's development against the five themes of ECM. The college recognises the need to base its evaluation much more on the outcomes actually demonstrated and is developing a clearer sense of the type of indicators which can provide useful and secure evidence. The AAV did not allow time to reach a judgement about the reliability of the current grading against the ECM themes, which is very high for such an early stage in the development of this aspect of a college's performance.

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

- Arrangements for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults were reviewed on the last AAV and found to be comprehensive and robust. The college will not be entirely compliant with the most recent regulations until it merges two separate lists into a single, central record of staff checks and includes the date their identification was checked.