

# The Sheffield College

## Focused monitoring visit report

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**Type of provider:** General Further Education college

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## FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

### Context and focus of visit

The Sheffield College is a large general further education college serving the local area. It is organised on a federal structure with three main campuses: Sheffield City College in the centre, Hillsborough College to the north and Norton College in the south of the city. A number of other sites meet the needs of local communities across the city and offer courses from pre-entry to higher education programmes. Courses are available in all subject areas and include apprenticeship and Train to Gain provision. In 2008/09 the college enrolled around 22,500 learners. The majority of full-time learners are aged 16 to 18 and most part-time learners are adults.

The college was last inspected in March 2010. At that inspection the college was judged to be satisfactory overall. Outcomes for learners, quality of provision, and leadership and management were all judged to be satisfactory. Its capacity to improve was judged to be good. Provision in the subject areas inspected was judged to be good in three and satisfactory in three. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, which include the two mandatory themes of outcomes for learners, and self-assessment and improvement planning.

### Themes

#### Self-assessment and improvement planning

<p><b>What progress has been made in improving the arrangements for self-assessment and quality improvement, including the use of monitoring data to analyse in-year progress, since the last inspection?</b></p>	<p><b>Significant progress</b></p>
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The college has re-designed curriculum level self-assessment to provide a sharper focus on the performance of individual courses. The process of internal peer group moderation between each of the federated colleges has been strengthened to provide greater scrutiny. Course leaders of underperforming provision present executive directors with a detailed analysis and action plan to address weaknesses. Heads of department have a more significant role in producing the overall college-level self-assessment report.

The college has introduced an electronic system to monitor progress towards completion of action plans. Targets and milestones for their completion are now specific and measurable and individual managers are more accountable for actions to achieve them. The new system provides much improved in-year monitoring of performance against a range of success indicators. Staff now have access to real-time data and are using them more effectively. The college has increased the opportunities for colleagues from across the federated colleges to meet and share good practice. College data indicate improved retention and success rates.

## Outcomes for learners

### What progress has been made in improving outcomes for learners?

### Reasonable progress

The success rate for learners aged 16 to 18 increased in 2009/10 and is now in line with the 2008/09 national average. While the success rate for adults increased, it remains below the 2008/09 national average. Success rates at entry and foundation level increased significantly for learners aged 16 to 18 although they remained relatively static for adults. Both are lower than the respective national averages. At intermediate and advanced level, success rates improved in 2009/10 and are broadly in line with those of similar colleges.

Success rates of underperforming subject areas in engineering and arts improved to the national averages. In construction, hairdressing, beauty therapy, and hospitality success rates are much improved and are significantly higher than those in similar colleges. On AS- and A-level courses success rates increased in 2009/10, with significant improvements in English language, French, mathematics, chemistry, and information technology. However, there remain a few AS subjects, such as biology, psychology, and law, where success rates are low.

### What progress has been made in improving success rates for learners on foundation level and Skills for Life programmes?

### Significant progress

The college has introduced successful initiatives that have led to a significant increase in the success rates on the preparation for life and work programmes. In 2009/10 success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 increased by sixteen percentage points and for adults by six percentage points. Specialist support staff work with learners who have literacy and/or numeracy support needs. The new manager has developed a clear plan to improve tutors' qualifications, update their skills and share good practice. A Skills for Life scheme of work is well supported by a range of interactive resources. A schedule of set assessments and feedback sheets are now being used to assess learners' writing skills. The college plans to audit the quality of students' individual learning plans and tutors' feedback to students to ensure a more consistent and comprehensive approach. Tutors who do not meet the standard have a mentor to support improvements.

At the time of this visit, there remain too many results yet to be processed in key skills and functional skills so it is too soon to judge the impact of the initiatives. In 2008/09 several short courses in literacy and numeracy, although only a very small proportion of the college's overall provision, had low success rates. College data indicate that success rates on short courses have improved significantly and are now high.

**How successful has the college been in narrowing the achievement gap of the vulnerable groups identified at the last inspection?**

**Significant progress**

Prior to the last inspection, the college had introduced strategies to improve the achievement of vulnerable groups although at the time of the inspection they had not led to improvements in success rates. An electronic monitoring system was piloted in 2009/10 to identify underperforming groups. A mentor successfully worked with a group of learners identified as being at risk of failing their course. They all achieved their qualification and have progressed to a higher level course.

College data for 2009/10 indicate significant increases in the success rates of minority groups. The achievement gap is reduced and most vulnerable groups now achieve in line with the college average. In 2009/10 retention of minority ethnic students improved by five percentage points and the overall success rate increased by eleven percentage points. In 2008/09 Pakistani heritage students significantly underperformed compared with White British students but their success rates are now equal to those of White British students. A few minority groups, such as Bangladeshi and Indian students, still do not achieve as well as their peers. The success rate of students with identified learning difficulties and/or disabilities increased by eleven percentage points last year and they now achieve in line with the college average.

**Quality of provision**

**What progress has been made to improve the process for observing teaching and learning and sharing good practice?**

**Reasonable progress**

The lesson observation system in place at the last inspection has been refined further to provide a more objective view on the quality of teaching and learning. A team of around 30 observers have participated in additional training and the observation documentation provides a greater focus on learning and the extent to which teachers stretch and challenge students. A schedule of observations is in place and it now covers agency staff, tutorials, in-class support staff and work-based learning sessions. The observation process involves moderation of grades and paired observations to ensure accurate grading. In the joint observations completed as part of the monitoring visit, inspectors broadly agreed with the college observers' judgements about the strengths and areas for improvement in the lessons. The outcomes of tutors' observations are linked to their annual appraisal and are backed up by a broad range of staff development opportunities and online teaching resources. However, it is too soon to judge the impact of the new scheme.

**What progress has been made to provide all full-time learners with appropriate work experience and work placements?**

**Reasonable progress**

The college has audited the extent to which individual courses provide access to work experience. Vocational areas previously providing insufficient opportunities have

been identified and appropriate work placement arrangements have been developed and piloted prior to full implementation. The proportion of full-time learners accessing work experience placements has increased from 18% in 2008/09 to an estimated 30% in 2010/11. Support for staff arranging work experience placements has improved through the development of a support pack and staff training based on the good practice identified in some vocational areas. The college has further strengthened the good opportunities for learners to engage in the positive enterprise activities identified at the previous inspection. While the college is committed to providing appropriate work experience opportunities for all full-time learners, it recognises that the systematic identification and provision, where appropriate, of work experience for AS- and A-level students remains an area for further improvement.

## **Leadership and management**

**What progress has been made in improving the learner involvement strategy?**

**Reasonable progress**

Following the previous inspection, the college undertook a comprehensive review of its learner involvement strategy. The production of a revised strategy, policy and three-year implementation action plan is well-advanced towards endorsement by governors later this term. The college has already strengthened its use of learner representatives to provide opportunities to obtain learner feedback at course level, although it recognises that this is less advanced for many learners studying part-time. After a period of inactivity, a newly re-energised student union is starting to represent learner views on a number of decision-making committees. The college recognises that much of the focus has been on implementing structures to support the new learner involvement strategy and that it is too early to judge how effective this will be. Learner representatives confirm that the college is responsive to their views and they provided some good examples of actions being taken in response to their feedback.

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