

South Staffordshire College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Anne Taylor HMI

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Address: The Green
Cannock
Staffordshire
WS11 1UE

Telephone number: 01543 462200

FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

South Staffordshire College was established in January 2009, through the merger of the Tamworth and Lichfield, Cannock Chase and Rodbaston Colleges. It is a large general further education college with four main campuses located in the south of Staffordshire.

The college offers courses in all sector subject areas. In 2009/10 approximately 21,000 learners enrolled at the college, around 4,200 on full-time courses. In addition there were approximately 1,500 enrolments by learners aged 14 to 16. The number of learners on work-based learning programmes was around 4,200; 1,100 on apprenticeship programmes and 3,100 on Train to Gain programmes in the workplace.

The most recent inspection report was published in July 2009. The college was graded good in capacity to improve and satisfactory in overall effectiveness, outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management. Of the six subject areas inspected two were graded good and four were graded satisfactory.

This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, all of which had been identified as areas for improvement at the last inspection.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in ensuring consistency in quality improvement across the college?

Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection the college has continued to establish a single college ethos through a revised management structure, open and frequent communication, and standardised policies, procedures and quality assurance processes. Management team structures across campuses now foster consistency.

Monitoring of performance is rigorous. Data are accurate. The comprehensive reports package is accessible electronically and is reviewed at the full range of meetings to improve performance and support intervention strategies. Managers understand their role in quality improvement. Termly quality improvement panels monitor progress against actions in the quality improvement plan (QIP). Programmes with identified quality issues or low success rates are subject to particularly close quality monitoring. Recent improvements help managers anticipate quality issues before they have an impact on success rates. Examples include increased data scrutiny incorporating learner progress measures, regular review of complaints and learner feedback, actions arising from external verifiers' reports and evaluations of lesson

observations. The college is increasingly using information technology as a management tool to drive quality improvement.

The self-assessment process is inclusive and self critical. The college has made an honest appraisal of its quality, including current inconsistencies. The QIP is appropriate and thorough; however it is too soon to see the full impact of improvements.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has the college made in improving the outcomes of all learners?

Reasonable progress

At the last inspection most success rates were satisfactory; pass rates were high on many courses but retention rates were low. In 2008/09 many success rates fell due to realignment of data practices across the merged college.

In 2009/10 the success rate on long courses rose to above the national average but fell on short courses. Amongst learners aged 16 to 18 the success rate on foundation level courses rose substantially, partly due to high success rates on a sustainability course taken by most learners. The success rates on intermediate and advanced courses were below the national average. Success rates of adult learners were around the national average. College data for 2009/10 show improvement in learners' achievement of high grades to above the national average and good progress of learners in relation to their minimum target grades. Pass rates remained high but retention rates remained below the national average.

The college is implementing and resourcing a comprehensive retention and achievement action plan. Data for 2010/11 indicate improvements in both attendance and retention. Very close monitoring of individual learners' progress is taking place. Retention on the first year of two-year courses is showing substantial improvement; however, the full impact on success rates will not be felt until 2012.

What progress has the college made in improving the outcomes of learners on employer related programmes?

Insufficient progress

In both 2008/09 and 2009/10 outcomes for learners on apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship programmes fell to well below the national average, especially for learners aged 19 or above. The proportion of learners achieving the qualification within the planned timeframe was very low. The proportion of learners on Train to Gain programmes achieving their qualification within the planned timeframe was also low.

During the past year a number of improvements have been introduced to the management structure, quality assurance and policies and procedures of work-based

learning, integrating the central unit within the whole college structure more effectively. Roles and relationships are now clear. The college has streamlined delivery of external provision through a number of higher-quality, more financially viable partners and is monitoring learner progress more rigorously. A detailed QIP for work-based learning is closely monitored by the senior team and governors. While there are some early indications that these improvements are having a positive impact on learner success, it is too early to see the full impact; the improvement plan was late being introduced.

What progress has the college made in improving outcomes on key skills and/or functional skills across all campuses? **Significant progress**

Since the last inspection the college has altered how key skills and functional skills are managed and delivered. Much work has gone into contextualising them to the curriculum areas. Learners are now more engaged in this work. Learners have a weekly lesson specifically on key or functional skills and also much of the skills understanding is now embedded in vocational lessons. Vocational tutors are well supported by specialist key and functional skills tutors. Methods of standardisation now have more rigour: specialist and vocational tutors meet regularly and also have frequent informal contact with each other. These efforts have had a significant impact on key skills success rates, which have improved significantly.

Most learners, except for apprentices, now study functional skills. The implementation of this programme has been well managed and early indications are that standards continue to improve. The college has involved learners well in the development of the programme. Learners have a clear understanding of functional skills and how they develop them; of the first cohort to take the tests, 81% passed.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in increasing the proportion of good and outstanding teaching and learning across all campuses? **Reasonable progress**

Since the last inspection the college has continued to improve the lesson observation process. In the last cycle they achieved the target of observing 100% of staff who were actively teaching during the period. Arrangements for using the information from observations are good. Data are collated and used well to help individual staff develop. Staff development is sufficiently well monitored. Analysis of data and summary statistics is satisfactory and used well to inform whole college staff development activities and quality improvement. Lesson observations are broadly accurate with observers clearly identifying key strengths and areas for improvement as well as a lot of additional detail to help staff improve. However, in some cases the focus on learner outcomes is not sufficient and grading is sometimes a little over generous. Lesson plans have been improved to identify how learners are stretched, supported and challenged within lessons; however this is not always highlighted

sufficiently by observers. The college grade profile shows clear improvement in the quality of teaching and learning.

What progress has the college made in ensuring learners from across the college are better able to use information and learning technology (ILT) to aid their learning?

Significant progress

Since the last inspection the college has made a range of improvements to learners' access to, and use of, ILT. A range of portable devices is available to learners; these are used particularly well, for example in hairdressing. Almost all sites have Wi-Fi access throughout. Learners are able to use college, and their own, devices to help their learning both in class and at other times. Learner access to the college intranet has been significantly improved both within the college and from home. Learners are very clear about the benefits of the electronic monitoring and recording of their progress. Assessment of learners' IT skills is thorough and they receive appropriate support, based on their needs and the technology to be used in their programme. Staff training is focused well on staff having the skills to help learners. The college has established two full-time posts, an e-learning manager and a Virtual Learning Environment developer, to support the use of ILT throughout the college. It has also trained and resourced nominated curriculum area staff as 'e-drivers'; they support staff and learners in using technology to improve learning. Learners are very positive about the significant improvements made by the college.

What progress has the college made in ensuring consistency in target setting with learners?

Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection the college has introduced a number of measures to improve the consistency of target setting with learners. A minimum target grade, based on prior attainment levels, is agreed individually with learners and progress toward this target is tracked in-year during tutorials. In 2010/11 an e-tracker system was introduced, facilitating target setting and tracking and the creation and monitoring of individual learning plans. The migration to this electronic system has been well managed and used well to focus staff development on improving target setting generally. Targets are now more focused and more effective in helping learners' progress. Targets are well understood by staff and learners. Target setting is monitored closely by tutors and curriculum managers.

The electronic system was introduced in September 2010 and is still being developed. While being very effective in monitoring individual learners' progress, the system has not yet been fully developed to provide staff with a range of summary statistics about the progress of all learners within a course and also to identify whether targets are being met within the target date.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in developing the skills of all curriculum managers?

Significant progress

Since the last inspection the curriculum management structure has been reviewed at all levels with curriculum responsibility by subject sector area rather than by site to foster consistency and the sharing of best practice. Meeting structures are clearly defined with standard and operational agenda items. Curriculum managers meet regularly as a team with the Directors of Quality and Curriculum. They are also supported by one-to-one meetings held at least monthly with their line manager. They are well informed of college priorities and current practice and are supported in their role by standardised policies and procedures that are easily accessible on the intranet.

A rolling programme of continuous professional development has been implemented based on self-identified and strategic needs. This covers human resource and quality procedures, data management, and financial processes. The solution-focussed training sessions are enabling further sharing of good practice. Curriculum managers speak knowledgeably about college strategy and detail within their curriculum areas, supported by reliable data.

To what extent has the college overcome the limitations of accommodation across campuses?

Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection the college has worked creatively to minimise the limitations of accommodation. The hairdressing and beauty therapy salons at Cannock have been completely refurbished, ILT infrastructure, including wireless networking, has been improved, and a new nursery is under construction in Cannock. A capital grant has enabled the construction of a new teaching block to replace temporary buildings at Rodbaston, opening in September 2011. Additionally improvements have been made to facilities for learners at Rodbaston, including the expansion of facilities for small animal care and a farm interpretation centre. A new media room has been established at Lichfield. Partnership developments with Lichfield Garrick Theatre and Tamworth Football Club have enabled performing arts and sports learners to benefit from off-site facilities.

There is some sharing of facilities across campuses, for instance art, media and music technology learners access the specialised facilities at other campuses, and learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities access land-based facilities at Rodbaston. A suite of college transport supports movement between sites and rationalisation across sites. The college is at the forefront of sustainable campus management and has achieved a number of national awards in this field.

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 1231231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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