

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Swindon College
Date of visit: 28 June 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

How effective are the actions taken to improve performance across different levels for 16-18 and adults? What is retention like for current learners?

- Actions taken to improve success rates are beginning to be effective. The college has a generally improving trend on retention and pass rates. However, as recognised by the college in the SAR for 2005/06, success rates remain below national averages.
- According to the college performance report (CPR) for 2004/05 overall success rates on all long courses for learners aged 16-18 are below national averages, and success rates for adult learners are around the national average. Whilst the difference between the percentage of learners aged 16-18 and adults that are retained is similar, adult learners achieve significantly better than learners aged 16-18. Success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 have declined over the three year period against a rising national average to be well below the national rate. In the same three year period success rates for adults have risen slightly to be around the national rate.
- According to college data for 2005/06, particularly significant improvements are to overall pass rates at level 1 for both learners aged 16-18 and adults. Success rates for learners aged 16-18 at level one improved by 19 %, from 2004/05 to 2005/06, and are broadly satisfactory. Current retention for these learners at this level shows a further slight increase but is unlikely to have been improved enough for it to improve success rates above a rising national average. Similarly success rates for adults at level one rose by 9% from 2004/05 to 2005/06 and are also broadly satisfactory. Current retention for these learners at level one is significantly better and shows a further 12%

increase on the previous year. Overall, despite improvements in retention, rates for learners aged 16-18 on long courses are unlikely to have improved enough to be above a rising national average. In particular current retention rates at level three for learners aged 16-18 have not improved significantly from last year. Current adult retention rates on long courses have improved more significantly and on all long courses the rise is at least 12% or above.

What strategies are being used to improve framework achievements and is the rate of progress for learners on work-based learning programmes at least satisfactory? Has the poor performance in construction and engineering been effectively addressed?

- A wide range of well-defined strategies and actions have been developed and implemented to improve framework achievements although their impact on improving all learners' progress and success rates is currently only satisfactory. A new management team and structure was put in place in November 2006, including management staff with a good understanding of industry need and apprenticeship programme management.
- Overall success rates for advanced apprenticeships rose from 34% in 2004/05 to 56% in 2005/06, higher than national rates. Overall success rates for apprenticeships improved from 35% in 2004/05 to 49% in 2005/06; below national rates. Overall, timely framework success rates for both are below the national rate. Within these rates, engineering and construction programmes account for the majority of learners and both are the poorest performers within the overall apprenticeship provision.
- However, there are indications that overall and timely success rates on all apprenticeship programmes have the capacity to improve significantly in the short to medium term; curriculum leaders are currently predicting overall framework success rates of 59% for all apprenticeships in 2006/07. New learners are being assessed and supported very closely within a comprehensive, newly developed quality improvement plan. Three new assessors have been appointed in motor vehicle and plumbing. Most new learners appear to be on track to achieve their frameworks on a timely basis.

- A good range of marketing and information materials has been developed to promote and raise the profile of apprenticeships to prospective learners, employers and families. Minimum qualification criteria have now been set for all programmes. Learners who do not meet the criteria have the option to undertake pre-entry, or foundation, vocational studies to bring them up to an appropriate level.
- Monthly key performance indicators across all work-based learning programmes are used well to drive improvement, and are disseminated throughout the WBL team. Good internal communication and sharing of best practice are used to highlight areas for refinement and further improvement. Key skills have been further embedded into curriculum areas.

Quality of education and training

How effectively have the changed arrangements improved the quality of teaching and learning? How is the impact measured and how is it used to inform staff development and training?

- The college has continued to strengthen the arrangements for observing teaching and learning and put new staff and managers in place with responsibility for improving teaching and learning. For example, the e-learning manager and a small team of staff are responsible for developing teachers' practice in a range of teaching methods principally involving e-learning technologies. The college has employed additional staff as advanced practitioners and increased the number of hours they are available to work with staff.
- Programme managers have an overall responsibility to ensure all teachers have a graded observation each year and a new senior manager oversees the process to ensure consistency of approach. External moderation now forms an important part of the process. A range of strategies are used to improve teaching and learning including mentoring and coaching, and detailed specific action planning following the observation. The college has increased the number of curriculum review days from 4 per year to 12 this current year. Workshops and training activities are part of these days with effective sharing of good practice between teachers. The college now regularly reviews the grades awarded and is close to meeting its own target of observing all substantive staff. The college considers its own grades to be more accurate with most

teaching satisfactory or good. Very little teaching is inadequate and a small proportion is outstanding. Peer observations are becoming more frequent and are highly valued by staff to improve practice. Records reviewed showed that observers are commenting fully on teaching and what activities were carried out but on some it is unclear what exactly is being learnt and how the teaching has impacted on learning.

- Lesson observations form part of a teacher's annual appraisal and this system has also been strengthened with three meetings a year, one to set objectives, followed by an interim meeting and a formal personal development review. Staff development is clearly linked to the outcomes of the appraisal and includes issues raised as part of the action planning following the graded observation. For example, if teachers receive a grade three or lower they are required to attend one of a series of frequent short training sessions the college offers to improve teachers practice.

How effectively do the strengthened arrangements improve the quality of the tutorials?

- Support for students is at least satisfactory. A wider range of support staff has been appointed since the last inspection, specifically specialist personal tutors, retention officers and student experience managers. While they appear to be having a significant direct impact on improving retention and attendance rates for some students at some levels, particularly younger and vulnerable students, it is not possible to identify a direct link or impact on improving retention, attendance and achievement overall.
- Specialist personal tutors have been introduced in all but one curriculum area and work closely with subject tutors and parents to provide a wide range of pastoral and academic support to all students, individually and in tutor groups. Within the past year tutors have been making good use of a value added, distance travelled framework to create individual learning plans and monitor a learner's progress. However, this process has yet to complete its first full year and full impact cannot be gauged. Support activities are organised within a well-planned and diverse annual programme. Within the tutorial system there is good cross-college promotion of and support for each of the five Every Child Matters elements. Initial assessment does not, at present, take place for all learners at their interview stage

- Three new retention officers have been appointed in the past year. They work with personal tutors to provide very close support to students with often very personal or challenging domestic issues. Local data indicates that this support has been effective in helping retain vulnerable students within the college. Three student experience officers have also been appointed very recently to provide greater standardisation and commonality of students' experience of the college and the range of support systems.

How does the college use the feedback gained to improve the quality of the learner's experience? What views do current learners have about the college?

- Regular learner surveys have been used well to identify ways to improve the learners' experience. Principal methods of collecting feedback include regular online questionnaires and focus groups. Response rates are good and there is extensive use of 'you said, we did' action and response. However, it is notable that over the course of the past year learner feedback from online questionnaires indicates continuing and variously poor levels of satisfaction with many aspects of the college, in comparison with national averages. For example, the rating for support was 9 points below benchmark in April 2006 and fell a further point in a repeat survey in May 2007. The overall rating for the quality of induction was 8 points below national average in both years, for teaching and learning 13 below, and course organisation 15 below in May 2007. These ratings are not reflected in the outcomes of focus groups, where students appear to be more positive in their views of aspects which scored poorly in the online questionnaire.
- Following an extensive survey with local schools of year 11 pupils the college has changed the aspects of the curriculum to better meet learners' needs. These include introducing fashion and unitising the curriculum in business and IT to enable learners to gain accreditation at each stage of their learning.

Leadership and management

Have the changes to the management structure had any impact on learner outcomes yet?

- Since the last inspection a new principal has been appointed and has been in post for just over a year. The college is still in the progress of implementing the new management structure which has greater emphasis on curriculum at senior management level. It is still therefore too early to judge the overall impact on learner outcomes. The restructuring is considered to be well-thought out and gives staff greater ownership and control in curriculum development. Team leaders feel they have greater clarity and clear purpose in their roles and communications with senior managers have improved significantly. New programme managers can cite positive impacts on success rates, a flexible and supportive approach to curriculum developments, which better meet learners' needs, and much better marketing. Recruitment now begins much earlier in the year and a recent well attended event has resulted in higher proportions of applicants enrolling than in previous years.

How is improved accommodation benefiting learners? Has the college reviewed whether it has improved space utilisation?

- The college accommodation strategy was developed over the last six years with extensive local consultation. Curriculum staff were also consulted and they comment favourably about the effectiveness of the teaching spaces and improved resources. The new building brought most of the curriculum to one site and was opened in time for most of the September 2006 intake. Facilities have been improved significantly particularly the availability of IT resources for use in classrooms and the number of computers for learners.
- The college has carried out surveys on space utilisation and these show under-utilisation and low average class size. The college has planned for growth and early indications show recruitment is up for next year. A number of strategies have been put in place including changes to timetabling to improve the class size. It is too early to judge how effective these strategies will be.

Any themes from the pre-visit analysis not explored during the visit:
None

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

- The college's strategies to improve attendance and punctuality have been effective with attendance continuing on an upward trend from previous years to be around 85% in 2005/06. Current attendance shows a similar percentage.
- The college has a large train to gain contract and is considered to be a high performing provider for this work in the southwest. The college works with a number of subcontractors who deliver on site training and coaching. There are 900 learners across all sectors this year and it is expected to rise significantly in 2007/08