

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Sandwell College

Date of visit: 4 October 2007

Context

Sandwell College is a medium sized further education (FE) college. The college has campuses in Oldbury, Smethwick and West Bromwich. Just under two thirds of learners are from Sandwell. Most of the remainder are from Birmingham, Wolverhampton and other Black Country boroughs. In 2006/07, the college had 6,603 learners. Of these, around two thirds were adults; just over half were female, around a twentieth were aged 14 to 16, about half were from minority ethnic groups and just under a twentieth were work-based learners. Nearly three quarters of learners are from areas of high deprivation. The college offers courses in all sector subject areas with the exception of agriculture, horticulture and animal care. The highest numbers of learners are in the curriculum area of preparation for life and work; health, public services and social care; ICT; business administration and law; retail and commercial enterprises; engineering and manufacturing and construction, planning and the built environment.

Sandwell's population is 282,904. Sandwell has a ranking of 16 out of 354 for the highest levels of deprivation in England. Sandwell's unemployment rate is about 2% above the national average. Some 20% of the local population are from minority ethnic groups. The percentage of pupils gaining five GCSEs at A* to C, including mathematics and English, in Sandwell in 2006 was 29.7% compared to a national average of 45.8%.

Sandwell College was last inspected in March 2006. At that inspection, the college's capacity to improve and the quality of provision were judged satisfactory. The effectiveness of provision, achievements and standards and leadership and management were judged inadequate. Inspectors found health and social care, construction and sport, leisure and travel to be satisfactory and ICT, preparation for life and work and business administration and law to be inadequate.

Achievement and standards

Are success rates improving?	Reasonable progress
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At the time of the monitoring visit, it was too early to judge the overall success rates for 2006/07, as the college was still processing data for learner achievement. Between 2003/04 and 2005/06, the long course success rate increased substantially by nearly three times the rate for similar colleges. For adult learners, the overall long course success rate increased very markedly. However, for learners aged 16 to 18, although the rate of increase was substantial, it was not as notable as for adults. At each of the qualification levels, rates of increase were marked. Nevertheless, the long course success rates overall for both learners aged 16 to 18 and adults in 2005/06 remained below the national average. Only at level 1, both for learners aged 16 to 18 and adults, were the long course success rates close to the national average. In each sector subject area, for overall long courses success rates in 2005/06 with the exception of business, administration and law, rates were above the LSC's minimum level of performance. The overall short course success rate in 2005/06 was just above the national average. The increase overall for the short course success rate between 2003/04 and 2005/06 was better than the national rate.

During the period from 2004/05 to 2006/07, the overall work-based learning success rate for framework completion in 2005/06 was well below the national average and had declined from 2004/05. However, in 2006/07 the success rate increased significantly to just above the national average. The rate for advanced apprentices in 2005/06 declined markedly on the previous year, but bounced back in 2006/07 to a particularly high rate, which was well above the national average. The rate for apprentices in 2004/05 and 2005/06 was low and below the national average. However, in 2006/07 the rate increased substantially to just above the national average.

Has the attendance of learners improved since the last inspection?	Reasonable progress
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An area for improvement at the last inspection and in the self-assessment report for 2005/06 was attendance. College data for 2005/06 and the inspection report indicated attendance was low. In 2006/07, the attendance rate had increased by 8% on the previous year. Senior managers now monitor attendance closely, particularly for each sector subject area. Tutors and teachers closely check attendance at tutorial and subject reviews and work effectively with the attendance officers to reduce learners' absences. The college provides incentives for learners to attend regularly. Managers set clear targets for attendance. Most are met or exceeded.

Sector subject areas with low attendance rates in 2005/06, with the exception of one, have all increased to at or above the college attendance target.

Quality of provision

Has the college resolved the issue with additional learning support?	Reasonable progress
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At the last inspection, arrangements for providing additional learning support were insufficient. At the inspection, inspectors found that, when a need was identified, the support learners received was good. However, the number of learners receiving support was extremely low. Since then the number of learners receiving support has increased significantly. All full-time learners and all learners on substantive part-time programmes now receive an assessment for additional learning support need, which was not the position at inspection. Success rates for learners receiving additional support in 2005/06 were similar to the college average. Between 2004/05 and 2005/06, the success rate for learners receiving additional support increased substantially. However, the college was unable to provide data for 2006/07 on the number identified as needing support that received help.

Has engagement with employers improved?	Reasonable progress
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The extent of engagement with employers was an issue at the last inspection. The college's employer engagement group of senior college and curriculum managers review and monitor work with employers more closely now. In sector subject areas, activities with employers have increased. These include more industrial updating for staff, higher numbers of learners on work placement and tailoring courses to meet employers' specific needs. Learners in business have had good interview experience with a local building society. The college has increased the number of partnerships with employers. Success stories with employers are promoted widely in college newsletters and subject area displays. Feedback from learners' work-placements, which is gathered at tutorials, contributes to course reviews. However, the college does not systematically analyse the impact of employer engagement.

Leadership and management

Is self-assessment rigorous and effective?	Reasonable progress
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The rigour and effectiveness of self-assessment concerned inspectors at the last inspection. The newly established standards unit has increased the focus and understanding of staff about self-assessment.

Staff at all levels have received extensive training on self-assessment, including how to make evaluative judgements. Course reviews are now effectively integrated into the self-assessment process. Better quality improvement arrangements including a stronger lesson observation process, more effective use of data, increased accountability of managers and closer monitoring and challenge of performance by senior managers contribute well to the self-assessment process. Moderation, including the use of external feedback on self-assessment reports for cross college areas and sector subject areas, is effective. The current self-assessment report provides a comprehensive account of the college's strengths and areas for improvements. The action plan for quality improvement is an integral part of the self-assessment process with clear links between the plan and the self-assessment report. The plan is detailed and has clear information on areas for improvement, actions, targets, milestones, monitoring arrangements, responsibilities and costs. Senior managers regularly and thoroughly monitor the effectiveness of the plan.

How effective are the steps that the college is taking to raise standards of accommodation for learners?	Reasonable progress
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The college is improving existing poor accommodation for learners including the provision of new learning centres, new catering arrangements at Oldbury and the redecoration of the different sites. Feedback from the learners' surveys is positive about the improvements to accommodation. The college makes better use of its rooms compared to at inspection. The Smethwick site is not compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act but the college provides alternative teaching and learning areas for learners with limited mobility. A major problem for the college is the number of its sites and their condition, upkeep and location. The college has finally secured a site for a new campus where it will operate from one location which has better transport links. This is due to open in the summer of 2010. The LSC and regional development agency are part of the arrangements to fund the new building. Staff and learners have contributed to the plans for the new facilities.