

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Walsall College
Date of visit: 11 October 2007

Context

Walsall College is a medium sized general further education (GFE) college. The college's main site is located in the centre of Walsall. Just under two thirds of the college's learners are from Walsall. Nearly all of the remainder are from adjoining local authorities. In 2006/07, the number of learners at the college was 10,677. Around a third were aged over nineteen, women accounted for just over half, a fifth were from minority ethnic groups and just under a twentieth were aged 14 to 16. In addition, the college had 1,039 Train to Gain learners and 402 work-based learners. The proportion of learners from areas of deprivation is high. The college offers courses in most sector subject areas. The highest numbers of learners are on courses in preparation for life and work; health, public services and care; ICT; engineering and manufacturing and retail and commercial services. At the time of the monitoring visit, the college had an acting principal.

Walsall's population is 253,499. The borough ranks 51 out of 354 for the highest levels of deprivation in England. Walsall's unemployment rate is 2% above the national average. Some 16% 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 Walsall in 2006 was 34.9% compared to a national average of 45.8%.

Walsall College was last inspected in May 2003. At that inspection, the overall quality of provision, and leadership and management were judged satisfactory. Support for learners was good. Inspectors judged health, social care and childcare to be outstanding; hairdressing and beauty therapy, visual arts, provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and literacy and numeracy as good, and business, hospitality and catering, performing arts, humanities and ESOL as satisfactory. Construction, engineering and ICT were judged unsatisfactory. In May 2005, these three areas were reinspected and judged satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Are success rates improving?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant 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 achievement data. Between 2003/04 and 2005/06, the long course success rate increased substantially, particularly for adults. In 2005/06 it was high and above the national average. The overall success rate for adults in 2005/06 was further above the national average than that for learners aged 16 to 18 years. At levels 1 and 2, success rates in 2005/06 were high and above the national average. However, despite a very marked improvement between 2003/04 and 2005/06, the rate was just below the national average at level 3.

In each sector subject area, overall long courses success rates in 2005/06 were above the LSC's minimum level of performance. In 2005/06, the success rate for short courses, under five weeks, was very high and above the national average. The success rate for short course, five to 24 weeks, was just above the national average in 2005/06. The success rates for both types of short courses between 2003/04 and 2005/06 increased at over twice the national rate of increase.

The number of Train to Gain learners that successfully completed their learning programme in 2006/07 was high. The framework success rate for work-based learners in 2006/07 was similar to the national average. Between 2004/05 and 2006/07, the rate of increase was marked but not as much as the national increase. The framework success rate for apprentices in 2006/07 was slightly above the national average. For advanced apprentices it was unsatisfactory and well below the national average.

Quality of provision

How effective is the use of information learning technologies (ILT) across all sector subject areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant progress
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At the last inspection, inspectors found that in better lessons the use of ILT was good, as was access to computers across the college for staff and learners. However, the use of ILT in lessons was limited in many sector subject areas, an area for improvement noted in the college's self-assessment report. The college has taken substantial action to address this issue. A review of ILT resources and the skills of staff has taken place.

The college established action plans to remedy identified problems and initiated training programmes for staff, and in sector subject areas where ILT skills and use were weaker. Staff now receive regular training on the use of ILT and specific training for particular areas of need and interest. Observations of teaching and learning now refer clearly to the use of ILT by teachers. The college has nearly doubled the budget for ILT between 2005/06 and 2006/07 to provide learners with resources which are of a high standard, motivating and innovative. Teachers' and learners' use of ILT has increased very substantially by over five fold between 2005/06 and 2006/07 including in the sector subject areas where there were issues.

Has the college improved keys skills provision?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant progress
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At the last inspection, inspectors found that planning, co-ordination and provision of key skills were mostly satisfactory in work-based learning but less effective in college-based programmes. The self-assessment report records that progress with the integration of key skills into sector subject areas is inconsistent. The college has made significant progress in improving key skills provision. Overall success rates continue to improve with a substantial increase in 2006/07. Teachers now integrate key skills into subject-based teaching and learning. The college has dedicated specialists in all subject areas to support staff with teaching and assessment of key skills. Quality assurance arrangements for key skills have improved and provision is managed and monitored effectively. Monitoring has identified areas of good practice however, these are not shared across all sector subject areas.

Has the college made progress in resolving issues of inconsistency in the quality of tutorials?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in resolving issues with the inconsistency in quality of tutorials, an area for improvement at the last inspection. The allocation of resources to train, guide and support tutors in providing tutorial care is substantial. Managers and staff have established a thorough tutorial programme across the college incorporating themes from 'Every Child Matters' where appropriate. Learners receive high standard tutorial materials. Tutors, through good use of ILT, share materials across the college. Tutorial paperwork now has a common format. Tutors use a well designed booklet to record the progress of learners during their time at college.

Records of learners' performance are comprehensive and show that sector subject areas use the tutorial documentation well to improve the progress and success of learners.

Occasionally learning targets are too vague. Perception surveys show a high proportion of learners are very satisfied with the tutorial programme.

Checking of the standards of tutorial provision through the college's quality assurance arrangements is effective and is part of the observation programme.

Leadership and management

How effective is the use of data on learners' performance?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant progress
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At the last inspection, the college had available a broad range of relevant and reliable management information. However, inspectors were concerned that some teachers did not use the information effectively and had little ownership of the data. This is also an issue recorded in the self-assessment report. The college has made significant progress in resolving this issue. All staff now have access to data on learners' performance. The college has set up staff training events on the use of data supported by detailed electronic learning materials. The senior manager for management information systems (MIS) has effective dissemination of data to college staff as a key part of her job role. MIS staff hold regular meetings with sector subject area teams to explain different aspects of data and its use. Minutes of sector subject area team meetings and action plans show that data on learner performance are now used particularly effectively to plan and evaluate provision, establish actions to remedy areas for improvement and set targets to increase learners' success rates.

Is self-assessment rigorous and effective?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant progress
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The last inspection report indicated issues with self-assessment including insufficient rigour, lack of focus on improving teaching and learning and the overstating of learners' success. The college has made significant progress in improving the rigour and effectiveness of self-assessment. The process systematically involves staff and uses a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative measures as evidence to contribute effectively to judgements.

During self-assessment, managers and staff are more realistic in their use of results from observations of teaching and learning and their evaluation of success rates than previously, when making judgements and deciding grades. Sector subject areas and business support teams review their own performance thoroughly, which managers check for effectiveness and rigour. Independent external advisers assess the overall thoroughness of the self-assessment process and report. The self-assessment report is a comprehensive document, which gives an effective appraisal of how the college is performing with text clearly showing how evidence supports judgements.