

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Solihull College

Date of visit: 5 June 2008

Context

Solihull College is a large general further education college in the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull. Over half of full-time and nearly a third of part-time learners are from the City of Birmingham. Three-quarters of full-time learners are aged 16 to 18 years. Overall, well over three-quarters of learners enrolling at the college are adults, but the majority study part-time. The north of the Borough has significant economic and social disadvantage. In 2006/07, 46% of learners were from widening participation backgrounds. In 2006, the college opened the Woodlands campus in north Solihull as a vocational centre for learners aged 14 to 19 years. A two year plan to redevelop the main campus is just starting. The college has Centres of Vocational Excellence in retail and, in partnership with two other colleges, for adult care. The college has provision in all 15 sector subject areas and has significant amounts of higher education provision. The college offers work-based learning, including Entry to Employment and Train to Gain. It also offers adult and community learning and has a small amount of learndirect provision.

The college was last inspected in July 2006. At that inspection, overall effectiveness was judged to be good. Achievement and standards were judged to be satisfactory. The quality of provision and leadership and management were judged to be good. Capacity to improve was judged to be outstanding. Provision in curriculum areas was judged to be outstanding in one, good in four, and satisfactory in one. An annual assessment visit took place in September 2006.

Achievement and standards

Are success rates in information and communication technology improving?	Reasonable progress
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The overall success rate on long courses in information and communication technology (ICT) declined between 2004/05 and 2005/06 to 33%. Adult retention rates were particularly low. Pass rates on short courses greater than five weeks in duration were also low. The college has made reasonable progress to resolve this issue. In 2006/07, overall success rates improved but remain below the national average on long Level 1 courses. These below average rates mostly relate to courses offered on a part-time basis. In 2007/08, the college reorganised the management of this provision for learners aged 16 to 18 years and anticipates improved success rates as a result. The college is undertaking a further review to improve the low adult success rate.

In 2006/07, success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 years on full-time courses at Levels 2 and 3 were well above national averages. Adult success rates at Level 3

were also high. These improvements have been underpinned by an effective curriculum review of full-time provision coupled with more effective information advice and guidance to ensure learners are recruited onto the correct programme. Standards of teaching and learning have improved through the effective use of teaching and learning coaches. Learner progress is carefully monitored and effective support is provided for learners at risk of not completing their programme.

At the time of the last inspection, work-based learning framework success rates were very low, have they improved?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in addressing this issue. In 2004/05, overall framework success rates for advanced apprentices and apprentices were very low. The success rate fell even lower for apprentices in 2005/06, with some improvement for advanced apprentices. Success rate for all apprenticeships improved considerably in 2006/07. For the majority of learners, who are apprentices, overall framework success rates and timely success rates have improved significantly and are above national averages. Overall framework success rates for advanced apprentices are in line with the national average but timely success rates are well above. In 2006/07, success rates on Train to Gain programmes were satisfactory.

Responsibility for delivery of work-based learning programmes is clearly delegated within faculties to sector subject schools, although overall, the provision is managed by the faculty of workforce development. The college places a high emphasis on the quality of information, advice and guidance and monitoring learners' progress with improved delivery of key skills. Actions to improve standards include good access to relevant staff development.

What progress has the college made towards the effective development and integration of key skills?	Reasonable progress
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The last annual assessment visit noted low key skills success rates in 2004/05. Concerns were raised about lack of ownership of portfolios by learners and inconsistencies in pass rates. The college's 2006/07 self-assessment report identifies that improvements had been limited, particularly at Levels 2 and 3. Overall, key skills success rates remained low. In 2007/08, the college has made reasonable progress to effectively develop and integrate key skills into the curriculum. In-year analysis of learner performance in 2007/08 predicts an improvement in success rate to 47%.

In support of improvements in 2007/08 the college has taken a number of actions. Key skills provision has been relocated within the faculty of community and skills for life. This faculty was graded outstanding at the previous inspection. Restructuring of this curriculum area included the appointment of a functional skills manager and a key skills manager. More accurate initial assessment of skills ensures learners are on the right level of key skills. The deadline for the completion of portfolios has been extended to mid-May to give learners time to use naturally occurring evidence from

their learning and skills programme. An intensive programme of staff development, which included clarification of portfolio requirements, a key skills support programme, key skills surgeries for staff, and programmes to improve tutors' communication key skills has taken place. Where needed, individual tutors receive support from teaching and learning coaches.

Quality of provision

How effective is the setting and use of learning targets for learners on business administration and law courses?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in improving the effectiveness of target setting on business administration courses. Staff training to improve their understanding of specific, measurable, accurate, realistic and time bound targets has been substantial. Managers have provided good levels of guidance and monitored the implementation of actions for improvement rigorously. More staff resources and time has been allocated. Learners now have a high level of awareness of their targets. Recording processes have improved. Success rates have improved considerably. Timely completion of NVOs has improved substantially to 90%. Learners are highly satisfied but the focus of the target-setting is still on pastoral matters and insufficiently focused on learning targets. The college recognises this issue and has a robust plan of action to make further improvements.

Has the use of ICT to support learning become more effective?	Reasonable progress
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From a slow start in the use of ICT two years ago, tutors have made a good effort to include its use in their teaching with varied degrees of success. The college has provided an extensive range of staff training for a large number of tutors. Many tutors champion the use of ICT. Teachers are given high calibre support by a very knowledgeable ICT manager. The ICT coverage in the main college has improved considerably and it is excellent at the Woodlands complex. Good practice is effectively shared between the staff and neighbouring colleges. Information is easily available for tutors, managers and learners on Moodle, the college's virtual learning environment, although its use is not yet extensive. Access to the internet is very good. Managers make explicit comments on the use of ICT in teaching observations which confirm good usage in several sector subject areas.

Have learning support arrangements improved, and specifically in numeracy?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in reinforcing the importance and value of numeracy support to vocational tutors and learners alike. The vocational tutors

received well prepared staff training. Initial assessment has been refined to accurately determine the starting point of each learner. The results of these assessments are swiftly communicated to vocational tutors. Numeracy tutors have conducted a detailed analysis of the numeracy content of various curriculum areas such as hair and beauty, early years care and construction. Liaison between the vocational and support tutors is very strong. Considerably more learners are receiving numeracy support. Numeracy support at the newly opened Woodlands complex has grown rapidly and is well established. Both individual and in-class learner support is very effective. The number of tuition hours has increased. A skills for life specialist is assigned to each subject sector area to develop even closer liaison and provide timely support to the tutors. Learners stay on the courses, make good progress and achieve qualifications. Success rates on numeracy qualifications at Level 1 have reached 82%, and many learners have progressed to Level 2.

<p>What strategies have been developed to meet the needs of learners in hair and beauty, and construction, and to extend the learning of the more able in science and mathematics.</p>	<p>Significant progress</p>
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The college has made significant progress in recruiting and substantially increasing the success rates of learners aged 16 to 18 years in hair and beauty, and construction. For example, the number of learners in construction over the past two years has risen to 237 and numbers in hair and beauty have risen by a third. This growth has been achieved at the college's Woodlands campus. Tutors work well to help learners overcome barriers to learning. Parents and learners value the ethos of support and achievement highly. Learners feel safe and secure in the learning environment and achieve well.

The curriculum has been redesigned to fully engage learners and maximise their chances of achievement. In most cases literacy and numeracy is fully embedded in vocational courses. Learners can sample a range of skills before they commit to learn a particular skill such as plastering, joinery, bricklaying or multi-skills or an apprenticeship. Learners' progress reviews are robust and learners take full responsibility for their own learning and future. In-year retention rates are very high at 90% and learners are making good progress towards gaining their qualifications. Similarly learners on hairdressing and beauty are making good progress.

Learners on first and national diplomas in science make good progress. Many of them enter the college with lower than average grades and nearly all of them progress to the university of their choice to study in science related subjects. Learners are given ample challenge to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding and apply this learning to many contexts in life. Added value for GCE A level learners in mathematics, physics and biology is satisfactory, but is poor for chemistry.

Leadership and management

How effective are the arrangements in place for the early identification and subsequent management of poorly performing courses?	Significant progress
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In 2006/07, data indicate that long course success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 years at Level 1 are in line with national averages, rates are well above at Level 2 and above at Level 3. Adult success rates at Level 1 have improved considerably and are high. Success rates at Levels 2 and 3 are at the national averages. In 2007/08 in-year retention data indicate further improvements, particularly at levels 1 and 2.

Course performance is regularly and carefully monitored at operational and management levels. The college takes greater care to respond quickly to the views of learners. Learners' progress is regularly monitored and reviewed. The college makes good use of 'learner at risk' reporting and uses tutor assistants well to support learners with personal issues. Responsive curriculum reviews are used well to address persistently poorly performing courses.

What has the college done since the previous inspection to improve employer responsiveness and employer engagement?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in improving its employer responsiveness and employer engagement. The college has a strong commitment to engage with employers. The college's dedicated business sales team of advisers offer both commercial and public sector employers effective whole business training solutions. They are supported by a telesales team. A newly installed customer relations management system has yet to be fully embedded. The college works with a wide range of large and small employers using a range of engagement activities. For example, the college makes good use of union learning representatives to help employees improve their skills for life and provide family learning opportunities. Learners who successfully complete a pre-employment programme are given a guaranteed job interview with one of the businesses based at Birmingham international Airport. Feedback from employers is good. The college is exceeding its Train to Gain recruitment profile in 2007/08.