

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Sandwell College
Date of visit: 27 November 2008

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, and other neighbouring Black Country local authorities. In 2007/08, the college had 5922 learners. Of these, around three fifths were adults; just over half were female and about half were from minority ethnic groups. The number of learners aged 14 to 16 years was 256 and the number of work-based learners was 173. 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.

Sandwell's population is 287,500. Sandwell has a ranking of 14 out of 354 for the average scores for the highest levels of deprivation in England. Sandwell's unemployment rate is about 4% 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 2007 was 30.2% compared with a national average of 46.8%.

Ofsted last inspected Sandwell College in March 2008. At that inspection, inspectors found equality of opportunity, range and responsiveness and guidance and support good. They judged as satisfactory the college's overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management. Hairdressing and beauty therapy was good. Health, care and public services, engineering and manufacturing technologies, construction, planning and the built environment, information and communication technology and preparation for life and work were satisfactory. Provision in business, administration and law was inadequate.

Achievement and standards

Has Sandwell College maintained and improved learners' outcomes?	Reasonable progress
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Between 2005/06 and 2007/08, the overall long course success rate for all learners increased to a satisfactory level at a rate slightly faster than for similar colleges. For learners aged 16 to 18 years the long course success rate between 2005/06 and 2007/08 increased a little more quickly than the national rate of increase. However, this was to a level slightly lower than that for similar colleges. The long course

success rate for adult learners between 2005/06 and 2007/08 increased markedly to a satisfactory level. The Level 1 long course success rate for learners aged 16 to 18 years between 2005/06 and 2007/08 increased more slowly than for similar colleges to a satisfactory level. For adult learners the long course success rate at Level 1 between 2005/06 and 2007/08 increased substantially to a high level. The Level 2 long course success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 years and adults in 2007/08 were lower than that for similar colleges. The rate of increase for long courses at Level 2 for learners aged 16 to 18 between 2005/06 and 2007/08 was at a slower pace than that for similar colleges but for adult learners it was quicker. In 2007/08, the long course success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 years and adults at Level 3 were lower than those for similar colleges. The rate of increase for long course at Level 3 for learners aged 16 to 18 between 2005/06 and 2007/08 was marked but for adult learners it was slower than that nationally.

The success rate for short courses between five and 24 weeks increased between 2005/06 and 2007/08 at a slightly faster rate than the national rate of increase to a satisfactory level. The success rate for short courses under five weeks between 2005/06 and 2007/08 stayed at a high level.

The overall framework success rate for work-based learners and the number that completed successfully by their targeted end date increased substantially between 2005/06 and 2007/08 to well above the national average. For advanced apprentices between 2005/06 and 2007/08 the overall framework success rate and the number that completed successfully by their targeted end date increased very substantially to a very high level. For apprentices between 2005/06 and 2007/08 the overall framework success rate and the number that completed successfully by their targeted end date increased markedly to just above the national average and to well above for the learners that completed successfully by their targeted end date.

Attendance of learners at the college has increased substantially between 2005/06 and 2007/08 and their punctuality has improved markedly.

Have success rates in business, administration and law increased?	Reasonable progress
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The overall long course success rate for business, administration and law increased substantially between 2005/06 and 2007/08 to a satisfactory level compared with other similar colleges. The rate of increase was marked for learners aged 16 to 18 and adults at Level 1 and Level 3 and at Level 2 for learners aged 16 to 18. However, the long course success rate at Level 2 for adults between 2005/06 and 2007/08 declined substantially to a rate well below that for similar colleges. Although overall, success rates increased at qualification level a minority did not. The overall framework success rate for work-based learning in business, administration and law was particularly high in 2007/08. The rate increased markedly between 2005/06 and 2007/08. The learners that complete successfully by their targeted end date in 2007/08 were also high and had increased substantially from 2005/06.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in resolving issues with target setting for business, law and administration learners?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in resolving issues with target setting. All business, law and administration learners have targets for punctuality and attendance. Managers and staff regularly review if learners are meeting these targets. They take effective action when issues arise. Most learners meet punctuality and attendance targets. Attendance by learners in business, administration and law between 2005/06 and 2007/08 increased from substantially below to the college average.

All staff have received training on how to set learning targets. Learners have also received training in this area. Managers regularly check to ensure learners have learning targets. Systematic arrangements are in place to provide learners with additional activities to help those that have not met their learning targets achieve them. However, although teachers explain targets to learners and a number of targets are written clearly, a minority remain insufficiently precise to inform learners on how to improve their performance.

Has the college remedied problems with study skills and work experience for full-time business, administration and law learners?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection, managers and teachers have had a stronger focus on developing the study skills of full-time learners. Learners now have a timetabled session which not only develops assignment work but also takes a more structured and effective approach in developing the skills of note taking and writing. Alongside this, learning support assistants provide additional individual help to learners to develop study skills, particularly those in need of more assistance. Staff development activities have focused effectively on improving teachers' expertise in developing learners' study skills.

Strategies to develop work experience for full-time learners are now securely in place. The college's business development team has arranged work placements for full-time learners. Managers and teachers have developed effective links with Black Country enterprise organisations and with the business development team to prepare learners for work experience. Teachers use tutorials successfully to match learners' interests to work experience placements. Teachers make effective use of the good practice from work-based learning to develop and plan work experience. Learners value the talks from external speakers which link the workplace to their course of study. Teachers now have the staff development opportunities to update their knowledge of business, administration and law through work experience. Managers recognise that while reasonable progress has taken place in resolving issues with work experience further work needs to be undertaken.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in improving the sharing of good practice across business, administration and law?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, the sharing of good practice across business administration and law was insufficient. The college has made reasonable progress in resolving this area for improvement. Managers, supported by teachers now place a stronger emphasis on the sharing of good practice. Within the business, administration and law team individual staff expertise is more widely shared and individual support for staff is better through buddying and mentoring. The role of subject learning coach role now has greater prominence in helping staff provide better teaching and learning. Managers and teachers make effective use of good practice from other sector subject areas, particularly sport, leisure and travel. For example, workshops on the understanding and using data have improved staff's understanding of success, pass and retention rates. The good practice from work-based learning has helped to develop better systems to monitor learners' progress. The business, administration and law teachers are also able to share their own good practice with other sector subject areas in the use of the resources. Information from the college indicates that actions on sharing good practice are improving the standard of teaching and leaning.

Is self-assessment accurate, rigorous and effective?	Reasonable progress
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Overall self-assessment is accurate rigorous and effective. Since the previous inspection, a number of key changes have taken place to ensure quality systems are more consistent and robust including the self-assessment process. The link between the process and course reviews is stronger. Self-assessment makes better use of the views of learners and employers. Moderation panels include learners in evaluating self-assessment reports from sector subject area. However, managers recognise that learners need further training to make an effective contribution to the process. Strengths and areas for improvement and almost all of the grades provide an accurate assessment of the college's performance. However, text to support judgements is not always sufficiently evaluative, a concern at the previous inspection. Quality improvement plans are a core part of the self-assessment process. The self-assessment process links to the outcomes from the previous inspection and addresses the issues from previous quality improvement plans well. The links between the 2007/08 self-assessment report and the quality improvement plans are clear.