

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology

Date of visit: 23 March 2009

### Context

Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology (the college) is a medium sized general further education college which serves the town of Shrewsbury and the surrounding county of Shropshire. The college has two main campuses, one on London Road and one in Radbrook. The college offers courses in all of the 15 sector subject areas. At its previous inspection in January 2008, the college's overall effectiveness was judged satisfactory. Of five sector subject areas inspected, three were judged as good and two as satisfactory.

In 2007/08, the college enrolled 1,444 students aged 16 to 18 and 3,426 adult students. The highest numbers of students studied at levels 1 and 2. The largest sector subject areas by enrolments were construction; health, public services and care; and preparation for life and work.

### Achievement and standards

How have success rates across the college's work improved since the previous inspection, especially for students aged 16 to 18 on level 3 courses?	Significant progress
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In 2007/08, long course success rates improved at all levels except at level 1 for adults, where the success rate was similar to the previous year. This brings the success rates at nearly all levels to be broadly in line with the average in similar colleges, except at level 1 for adults where the rate is above average and at level 3 for adults where a gap still remains. The improvement at level 3 for students aged 16 to 18 was marked, with an increase of 11 percentage points. This increase reversed the decline to well below average in 2006/07, identified as an area for improvement at the previous inspection. A considerably improved retention rate was a significant factor, an area that the college had targeted for improvement. The retention rate in the current year is increased further compared with a similar point in 2007/08. The college analyses the performance of different groups thoroughly. The success rate for male adult students at level 3 is considerably improved from a previously weak position.

The college is using value-added measures from the Learner Achievement Tracker as a basis for evaluating the progress students make. It is investing considerable senior management time in developing understanding of these measures across all levels of management to ensure that students achieve their full potential. At level 3, this measure shows a positive score for students studying at national diploma level and

shows improved value-added in several sector subject areas. Added value at national award level is negative especially in construction, an area for improvement identified in the college's self-assessment report. The DCSF contextual value-added measure at 1008 indicates that the college is adding value to students' performance. The average point score per qualification entry at level 3 has risen each year since 2006 and is also above average.

The success rate in key skills qualifications increased markedly in 2007/08 continuing the positive trend over the last three years. The success rate is well above the low national average. The college has grown its Train to Gain provision considerably. Results for the college's first full year of this provision in 2007/08 are satisfactory. Framework completions for work-based learners have continued to improve. In 2007/08, the rate for 16 to 18 year olds was satisfactory. Data available for the current year shows a notable improvement towards a high rate with much improved timeliness of completion.

### Quality of provision

How much progress has been made in developing the quality and effectiveness of target setting and individual learning plans?	Insufficient progress
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All students now have an individual learning plan that is held electronically and is accessible by both student and their tutors, including remotely. The individual learning plan includes a full range of data about each individual student, including prior attainment, and short term learning targets set through regular individual meetings. Targets are time bound and are clearer and more specific than those seen at the previous inspection. However, as identified in a rigorous review of the quality of these plans undertaken by the college recently, the majority of short-term targets are insufficiently sharply focused on the development of skills and too many targets lack sufficient challenge. Individual action plans for each sector subject area have been put in place to resolve these shortcomings, but it is too early to judge the impact of these actions. Very few individual learning plans contain target grades for students' qualification aims, reducing their usefulness in motivating students to achieve their full potential. The college recognises that this aspect of target setting is under developed and plans are well advanced to ensure that realistic target grades are in place for all students at the start of the next academic year. The methodology to underpin the college's intended approach to target setting is being trialled appropriately with one department in the current academic year.

How have teaching and learning improved since the previous inspection?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection, the college has organized a comprehensive programme of staff development to improve teaching and learning. Activities have included a well received and productive college-wide conference on pedagogy; the introduction of peer observations with an expectation that all teachers will observe and be observed annually; and useful action research in a number of course or programme teams to identify and share good practice in teaching. Staff performance reviews are more closely linked to outcomes from teaching observations and to

external competency frameworks. The college's analysis of the quality of teaching and learning identifies improvements in the use of effective questioning in lessons, an increased focus on the promotion of evaluation and reflective skills in level 3 courses and increased variety in teaching strategies used in lessons.

What further developments have been made in the provision of key skills and initial assessment?	Reasonable progress
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The curriculum for key skills provision has been extended to include provision for the three core key skills. Students study towards two key skills each year based on their initial assessment of need, prior qualifications and the focus of the vocational area in which they are studying. A college-devised initial assessment of information and communication technology skill is being introduced. The number of qualifications in key skills being taken in the current academic year is double that of the previous year as many more students gain the opportunity to accredit their skills. Most enrolments are at level 2. Key skills assessments are all contextualised to the appropriate vocational area and, in many cases, are appropriately embedded within the scheme of work.

To what extent have further developments been made in the use of information and learning technology (ILT) in teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress
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Since the inspection, the college has continued to promote the importance and benefits of using information and learning technology in all its courses. All parts of the college are now wireless enabled and staff have ready access to laptop computers. All staff have completed a self-assessment of their information and communication technology skills. This was used effectively to plan college-wide staff development events. A college-devised self-assessment tool is about to be launched, after extensive piloting, for course leaders to indicate the extent to which their courses make use of the college's virtual learning environment. Outcomes from the survey will be used to inform further relevant staff development as well as to publicise those courses that are making good use of the facility. Students have responded very positively to the development of the student zone in the virtual learning environment, and some have taken the lead in moderating discussion forums. A staff zone within the virtual learning environment has also been well received.

## Leadership and management

What improvements have been made to quality improvement arrangements?	Reasonable progress
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Improvements in quality assurance arrangements are wide ranging and represent a shift away from the previous focus on compliance with systems towards a clear focus on improving the quality of provision. Improvements include more rigorous observations of teaching and learning, including strengthened moderation arrangements and supported by extensive staff development for observers. The observation programme includes coverage of assessments undertaken in work-based learning. A three year rolling programme of mini-inspections has also been recently

introduced as a key feature of revised quality assurance arrangements. These mini-inspections draw on evidence of detailed students' performance data, students' views, findings from lesson observations, and scrutiny of students' work. An overall grade is awarded for each subject area inspected. Three well structured mini-inspections have already been completed in the current academic year. Grades awarded are well supported by judgements in two reports but the grade awarded in one is not well supported by the judgements contained in the report.

The links between the outcomes of lesson observations, mini-inspections and targeted professional development are becoming more clearly established. The quality of courses continues to be monitored closely and courses where retention drops to 80% or lower are targeted promptly for intervention and support. The online register system is being used well to identify students who are not attending, and prompt and effective action is taken, including contacting parents or carers, as necessary. Bi-monthly reviews of attendance and retention with course leaders now take place with impact evident in improved retention and attendance.