

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Sparsholt
Date of visit: 23 June 2009

Context

Sparsholt College, a large specialist land based college, merged in August 2007 with Cricklade College to form Sparsholt College, delivering provision across two campuses. In 2007/08, total enrolments (excluding key skills) at the college were 13,508. This included 1,847 full-time and 160 part-time 16 to 18 year olds, and 288 full-time and 1,517 part-time adult learners, all funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). There were 485 learners aged 14 to 16 and 408 work-based learners in 2007/08. The college also provides a range of higher education courses with 482 learners in 2007/08.

The college was last inspected in June 2008 when the overall effectiveness of provision was graded as good, as were the quality of provision, leadership and management and capacity to improve. Achievement and standards were satisfactory. Five curriculum areas were inspected, with three judged to be good and two judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has the college made to improve students' achievements?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress to improve achievements and standards since the previous inspection. Overall success rates have improved, particularly at the Andover campus, where the headline success rate increased from 69% in 2006/07 to 79% in 2007/08, which is above the national average for similar colleges. In 2007/08, students' retention rates were 3% above the national average whereas the achievement rate was 3% below it. Current in-year retention rates are high and indicate a further improvement in retention.

Success rates for learners of all ages on long courses increased from 70% in 2006/07 to 77% in 2007/08. However, during the same period, the success rate for learners taking all short courses fell from 85% to 81% which is below the national average. Between 2006/07 and 2007/08, success rates for level 3 learners on long courses increased significantly to above the national average, rising 12% to 80% for learners aged 16 to 18 and increasing 22% to 72% for adults. They increased marginally at level 1 for 16 to 18 year olds, but decreased for adults and are around the national average. At level 2, success rates decreased for 16 to 18 year olds and increased for adults, and are below the national average for both age groups. Although the

general picture is one of improvement, there is too much inconsistency in success rates between curriculum areas.

The college analyses closely the outcomes of learners by gender, disability and ethnic groups. The number of learners of minority ethnic heritage is too small to make judgements on whether there are significant differences between groups. There is little difference in the success rates of male and female learners. Analysis of value added scores for learners indicates that learners generally achieve what is expected of them based on their prior achievement, with significant gains in some subjects.

The achievements of work-based learners are satisfactory. Framework success rates for apprentices in 2007/08 were 63% which is comparable to the national rate for all apprenticeships. Timeliness of completions rose to 62% (an increase of 19%) in 2007/08 against the national rate of 48%. Success rates for key skills are good. In 2007/08, almost all key skills success rates were significantly higher than the national averages.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made to ensure teaching meets the needs of all learners?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection, managers have placed greater emphasis on identifying areas for improvement in teaching and learning. Appropriate support is provided for individuals through continuing professional development. Recent training has focused on ensuring teachers vary tasks and activities in lessons to meet all learners' needs. The college's lesson observation scheme has been strengthened. Judgements on teaching and learning are moderated effectively through joint observations between college staff and partnership arrangements with other colleges. Observers' reports are checked regularly to ensure the grade awarded matches the text. Learner Development Coaches (LDCs) provide good support for staff, particularly those whose lessons have been judged less than good. Further observations are conducted to check progress on the actions agreed for improvement.

All new teaching staff are allocated a mentor and their lessons are observed by the LDCs. A peer observation scheme has been introduced in some curriculum areas to help teachers to develop their teaching skills. The 'learner voice in the classroom' project, introduced in the same curriculum areas, allows students to provide regular feedback to teachers on their perception of the quality of lessons. Initial indications show high popularity with students and staff for both schemes and it is planned to share them across the rest of the college in the next academic year.

How much progress has been made to improve the quality of target-setting and the monitoring of students' progress?	Insufficient progress
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Some progress has been made to improve the quality of target-setting and the monitoring of students' progress, but this has been insufficient overall since the previous inspection. Individual meetings take place regularly between tutors and full-time students where an individual learning plan (ILP) is compiled, targets are agreed and the progress of learners is reviewed. The sixth form academy has implemented procedures for electronic ILPs. Although these electronic ILPs are fully accessible to staff, learners and parents do not have any access to them currently, although this is planned for September 2009. The other three academies continue with paper-based procedures and there are plans for all ILPs to become electronic in the next academic year.

Staff training has taken place, and more is planned, to familiarise tutors with tutorial procedures and to ensure students' targets are specific, time-bound and measurable. However, the quality of ILPs is too variable. In some curriculum areas they are comprehensive, with holistic targets that raise aspirations of learners. In other areas, targets are too general and learners are not always provided with precise actions that will enable them to be more successful on their course. Targets for improvement are agreed between learners receiving additional learning support and learning support staff, but there are currently no rigorous procedures to incorporate these targets into the students' main ILP. Curriculum managers audit ILPs from their own curriculum area, but monitoring is not carried out systematically across the college to evaluate the overall quality of ILPs and the targets being agreed with learners.

The quality of group tutorials is monitored through the college's system of lesson observations. Some observation of individual meetings between tutors and learners were carried out by a consultant, but these meetings are not routinely part of the college's observation scheme. Also, no systematic method of obtaining feedback from learners on their perception of the quality and usefulness of these meetings takes place, making it difficult for managers to evaluate their effectiveness.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made to improve the quality of provision in information and communication technology?	Significant progress
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Information and communication technology (ICT) was judged to be satisfactory at the previous inspection and the college has made significant progress to improve this provision. Success rates on the full-time first and national diploma courses in information technology (IT) are high and have shown continual improvement. For students aged 16 to 18, success rates on most courses have improved to above national averages, some to 100%. Where applicable, achievement of higher grades has also improved to above national averages. The progress made by students on vocational programmes, compared with their starting points, is high. In 2007/08,

overall success rates for adults were comparable to national averages. While rates for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) programme were high, those for the certificate for IT users, and in computer-aided design, were low. However, college data for courses already completed in 2008/09 show that success rates have improved. A student mentoring scheme has enabled students to gain more confidence in their skills and improve their standard of work.

Links between college staff and employers have improved. The college is working with local companies to develop appropriate projects for students and to develop further modules. The college intends to further develop its curriculum through the Entry to Employment (E2E) and Train to Gain programmes, as well as through its leadership of a new 14–19 IT diploma in 2010. A new peer observation scheme allows teachers to share good classroom practice and to develop more interesting ways of teaching their subject. Feedback on the quality of lessons from students is acted upon quickly and effectively.

How much progress has been made to improve the quality of provision in science and mathematics?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress to improve the quality of provision in science and mathematics. The high retention rates reported in the previous inspection report have been maintained. Success rates for AS level subjects improved overall and are satisfactory, although they declined in mathematics and physics. Due to the very low progression rate of students between AS and A level subjects in 2007, too few students were on A level courses to make a judgement on success rates. However, this progression rate improved in 2008.

The college has improved its links with local companies, enabling vocational students to undertake more realistic projects, and for some to gain work experience during vacation periods. Teachers have taken advantage of the new schemes introduced to raise the quality of teaching and learning. Good use is being made of the peer lesson observation scheme to share good practice in science teaching.