

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Solihull College

Date of visit: 18 May 2009

### Context

Solihull College (the college) is a large general further education college in the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull. Over half of full-time and a third of part-time students are from the City of Birmingham. Three-quarters of full-time students are aged 16 to 18 years. Overall, well over 80% of students enrolling at the college are adults, but the majority study part-time. The north of the Borough has significant economic and social disadvantage. In 2007/08, 45% of students were from widening participation backgrounds and over 20% of students were from minority ethnic groups. The college provides mostly vocational provision. The Woodlands campus in north Solihull supports a 14–19 collegiate as well as adult and vocational learning. The college's main campus is in the south of the borough, where redevelopment of the campus is just starting. The college was awarded the Training Quality Standard in December 2008. It 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, when 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 sector subject areas was judged to be outstanding in one, good in four, and satisfactory in one. An annual assessment visit took place in September 2006 and a monitoring visit took place in May 2008.

The college's 2007/08 self-assessment report identifies continuing improvements. Overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, quality of provision and leadership and management are graded as outstanding. Achievement and standards and equality of opportunity are graded as good. Five sector subject areas are graded outstanding, nine are graded as good and one is graded as satisfactory.

This feedback contains brief findings from the 2009 annual monitoring visit. It focuses on the themes explored during the visit and does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the college's performance.

## Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made to improve or maintain high levels of success rates for particular groups of students?	Significant progress
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The college's own data for 2007/08 show a continuing trend of improvements with overall long success rates at 76%. Since 2005/06, success rates for students aged 16–18 increased by 8% and adult success rates increased by 14%. Success rates for 16–18 year olds are similar at all levels, but for adults they vary from 80% at level 1 to 72% at level 3.

In 2007/08, long course success rates for students aged 16–18 are high at level 1 and 2 and are above average at level 3. Achievement rates are at the national average, whereas retention rates at levels 1 and 2 are above the national rate. In 2007/08, adult success rates are high at level 1, above the national rate at level 2 and at the national rate at level 3. Achievement rates are at the national averages.

Most students achieve in line with expectations. Long course success rates for students aged 16–18 are similar for both male and females and these rates are better than for adults. College data for 2007/08 indicates that most students aged 16–18 with minority ethnic backgrounds have success rates above the success rates for their white counterparts. This pattern is mostly the same for adults.

What progress has the college made to improve outcomes in work-based learning?	Reasonable progress
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In 2007/08, apprenticeship framework completions of some 350 students continued to increase and are just above the national rate at 69%. Timely completions are just above the national rate at 55%. Advanced apprenticeship overall framework completions of about 50 students are just below the national average at 59% in 2007/08 having increased from 54% in 2006/07. Timely completions have declined and are low.

In 2007/08, Train to Gain success rates are satisfactory. Skills for Life success rates are above the national rate, but full level 2 achievements are 65% overall and are low in retail and commercial enterprise and leisure, travel and tourism. In-year success rates for students who have completed their programme in 2008/09 show a significantly improving trend.

What progress has the college made to improve key skills provision?	Significant progress
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New arrangements for the provision of key skills have been introduced in 2008/09. Diagnostic assessments have been improved to include a free writing exercise as well as a computerised assessment. The results of these assessments are used to help

students understand the importance of English and mathematics in their chosen subjects, society and in the workplace. All full-time students at level 2 are required to take English and mathematics unless they have a GCSE grade A\* to C in the relevant subject. Vocational tutors and specialist tutors have been supported by a relevant and extensive staff development programme. Tutors continue to improve the vocational relevance of these subjects and the assessment procedures.

Students are able to take an end test in English and mathematics when ready. To date, 46% of students have achieved a qualification. The college expects this to rise to 64%, which will be in excess of the challenging targets the college has set itself and compares favourably with the overall success rates of 47% in 2007/08.

### Quality of provision

<p>What progress has the college made in making further improvements in teaching and learning, including their use of teaching and learning coaches and the use of information learning technology?</p>	<p>Significant progress</p>
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A team of well qualified and experienced teaching and learning coaches continue to provide timely and highly effective support and encouragement to tutors. Almost all tutors make effective use of an extensive range of information learning technology equipment to enhance learning experiences. Learning resources are extensive. Students who cannot afford computers are able to borrow a range of IT equipment such as laptop computers, voice recorders and digital cameras from the library.

The college has made excellent progress in making learning accessible to students and staff through its highly flexible virtual learning environment. It stores a wide range of course-related information. Students can catch up effectively, should they miss a lesson. Students submit their assignments electronically at times convenient to them and receive constructive tutor feedback through the secure virtual learning environment. Tutors have benefited from an extensive range of highly relevant staff development on the use of information learning technology and are much more confident to use it to enhance their teaching. The sharing of good practice is well established. This includes sharing of learning resources, hints and tips and using peer support in lesson planning and peer observations.

Students' satisfaction with teaching and learning is high. Approximately 80% of the students cite the quality of teaching as the key reason for joining Solihull College. The college has a comprehensive system of assuring the quality of teaching and learning through experienced internal and external teaching observers. Over a quarter of lessons observed are assessed as outstanding and in the last two years the proportion of good or better lessons has been maintained at over 80%. Quality checks on the observers through a well-established moderation process are thorough. Tutors take pride in improving their teaching grades and often ask for observations to be repeated to gain a higher grade.

What progress has the college made to ensure that students' progress is effectively monitored and that timely and effective support is provided for students at risk of not completing their course?	Significant progress
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The college has raised further the level of timely and effective support to students at risk of not completing their programme of learning. Staff carefully identify at-risk students and take a proactive approach at all stages to monitor their progress. Staff have high levels of awareness of the factors and triggers that put students at risk. The number of students from widening participation categories has increased in 2008/09, and the college has put in place a robust system of appropriate support. Twelve well experienced and qualified tutor-assistants identify promptly any issues facing students and provide extremely supportive and timely interventions. They often act as a conduit between the students, tutors and parents. Attendance and retention rates have improved and are very high. The number of exclusions and disciplinary issues has dropped every year in the past three years. Managers conduct a rigorous analysis of at-risk students and monitor the level of support to ensure their progress.

What progress has the college made in developing partnership working with local schools?	Significant progress
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The college continues to develop its working relations with local schools and other key organisations. The college plays a leading role in two collegiates, one representing the north of the borough and one the south. Each collegiate has its own unique features. Partnership working has been enhanced by the development of the Woodlands college campus which provides a strong 14–19 curriculum offer with five partner schools. The college has strengthened its arrangements by offering a 'common' day approach when all year 10 or all year 11 students can attend the college. Currently some 140 students aged 14–16 access the college's vocational provision and over 40 are enrolled on the new 14–19 diploma in information technology at level 1. Four new diplomas will start in September 2009 and another four are planned to start in 2010.

A wide range of promotional activities, including careers conventions, road shows, application workshops and taster days, provides potential students with information about their options and choices at the college. Most activities focus on years 10 and 11. Recruitment trends from schools in the college's catchment areas are increasing. Productive partnership working with local sixth form schools includes master classes, higher education fairs and the Aimhigher initiative.

What progress has the college made in making further improvements to student services?	Significant progress
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The profile of student services remains very high in the college. A broad range of student services is provided by a well qualified and knowledgeable team of staff. Collaborative team working is good. Increased levels of pastoral, welfare and counselling services are working well to ensure students access all the support they

need to stay on in learning and make expected progress. The college has responded well to deal successfully with a large number of claims for educational maintenance allowances. Childcare, student support funding and adult learning grants are used well, with the latter increasing by 36% in 2008/09. Careers guidance, particularly in applying to higher education, is good; however this is not as effective for part-time students who want to progress into other academic areas and/or work.

The college has good links with local special schools and has good levels of expertise in dyslexia and other learning disabilities. Students with such needs are taught alongside other students with good levels of support. The success rates of most students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are satisfactory or better. Tutorial support for full- and part-time students is well organised and coordinated. Attendance of students is satisfactory.

#### Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in improving quality assurance arrangements to improve consistency of performance?	Significant progress
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The college has set out a challenging programme to improve the consistency of performance. The college's quality arrangements to secure improvements include a number of key elements. The college has revised and clarified the entry criteria for each course to ensure students have a programme of learning with achievable outcomes. An ongoing review of the curriculum has secured improved progression routes. Targeted use of the seven teaching and learning coaches is helping to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Staff training continues to support improvements in the quality of tutors' work. Teachers, who have been identified as using good practice in their work, provide regular training sessions to share their skills with others.

Regular reporting arrangements against targets include reports on students' retention and attendance and an assessment of students at risk of not completing their course. The college is improving the skills of its managers through a programme of management training. As part of the college's self-assessment processes, course reviews, with monthly reviews of related quality improvement plans were introduced in 2008. This is resulting in improved levels of engagement by staff and improved levels of responsibility and accountability. The learner engagement strategy ensures that the views of students are effectively addressed through questionnaires, focus groups and the use of a mystery shopper.

What progress has the college made in maintaining high levels of employer responsiveness, including the introduction of a new employer engagement strategy?	Significant progress
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Solihull College continues to develop a strong business-related focus to the delivery of integrated whole business training and support solutions in both the private and public sectors. The work of the business sales team is well supported by the customer relations management system which provides a performance driven focus to meeting employers' needs. The college works with a wide range of large, small and medium sized businesses to offer an increasingly relevant range of accredited and non-accredited programmes. The well established Birmingham Airport scheme is providing high levels of employment for the long term unemployed. Newer projects, linked to the college's national skills academy for retail include work with the Bull Ring management company to support 140 companies working in the retail sector. The college has recently started an European social fund project to support employees achieve level 1 and level 4 qualifications. To date in 2008/09, growth in apprenticeships and Train to Gain programmes is well above previous levels and full-cost training fee income is on target to double.