

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Sutton Coldfield College  
Date of visit: 2 June 2009

### Context

Sutton Coldfield College is a large general further education college in North East Birmingham. It is situated on three main campuses at Sutton Coldfield, Stockland Green and Great Barr. Smaller campuses are located in Erdington and Sutton. A range of provision is also delivered in community-based settings and the workplace. The college merged with Josiah Mason College on 1 August 2006, a sixth form college situated in one of the most socially deprived areas of the City of Birmingham. A new principal took up post in May 2007. The college's merger with Matthew Boulton College is not yet complete. The college has reorganised most of its procedures in response to the earlier mergers and the planned merger with Matthew Boulton College. This includes the adoption of a new management structure and the harmonisation of processes in order to maximise the benefits of best practice, such as self-assessment and data management. Further changes are planned which include the construction of a new campus. For the purpose of this monitoring visit the self-assessment report and data for Sutton Coldfield College was disaggregated from that used by the combined colleges. The college has the Centre of Vocational Excellence status in integrated manufacturing, adult care, business and entrepreneurship and has achieved the Training Quality standard.

Sixty-one per cent of the 8,725 full-time equivalent learners enrolled in 2007/08 were aged 16–18. Of the 18,210 learners who attended the college, 46% were males, 44% were from minority ethnic heritages and 64% were full-time students. The college offers courses in 14 sector subject areas, with 49% of the provision at level 3.

The college was last inspected in June 2006. Provision was judged to be outstanding in one curriculum area, good in three and satisfactory in one. The key cross-college areas of achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management were judged to be good, as was effectiveness of provision. Capacity to improve was judged to be outstanding. There are few changes to the grade profile in the college's 2007/08 self-assessment report. As in 2006/07, overall effectiveness, outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management are graded as good and capacity to improve as outstanding. The sector subject area grades have improved, with one graded outstanding and the remainder graded as good.

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

The progress in improving or maintaining high levels of success rates for learners aged 16-18.	Significant progress
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In the three years to 2007/08, the college's long course success rates improved by 7% and at 74% are in line with benchmarks. Between 2006/07 and 2007/08, success rates for learners aged 16–18 increased by 6% and are now above benchmarks. Success rates are high at level 1 at 87%, above benchmarks at level 2 and marginally above benchmarks at level 3. Success rates in science and mathematics, which was a theme explored at last year's monitoring visit, improved significantly and are above benchmarks. Success rates in preparation for life and work remain high. Short course success rates are at or above benchmarks.

When compared with other general further education colleges, AS level success rates for learners aged 16–18 improved in the three years to 2007/08 and are above benchmarks. At level 2, success rates have also improved and are above benchmarks. Other level 3 courses have not improved at the same rate and are just below benchmarks. When compared with sixth form colleges, at level 2, success rates for learners in 2007/08 were near benchmarks, however the success rate for AS level had not yet improved to the benchmark.

The progress in improving support for adult learners	Reasonable progress
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Between 2005/06 and 2007/08, a period of transition for adult learners following the merger with Josiah Mason College, improvements in success rates were slow, to around national benchmarks and achievement rates were just below benchmarks. Success rates for adult learners were below benchmarks at level 1, above benchmarks at level 2 and at benchmarks at level 3. Short course success rates were at or above benchmarks. The college is aware of this slow improvement and has taken a number of steps to rectify the situation. A review of provision has resulted in adjustments to the curriculum offer in low performing curriculum areas such as information and communication technology and creative and performing arts. Restructured guidance arrangements now ensure all students have the same access to information, advice and guidance and other services. Entry criteria have been further tightened up to ensure learners can cope with the demands of their chosen programme of learning. All adult learners complete an initial assessment of need as part of their induction programme, and for those wishing to attend access courses, this assessment is completed prior to their interview. Tutorial arrangements have improved. The college's study centres have been relocated and provide better access. However; In-year retention rates show only modest improvements.

A group of adult students met during this monitoring visit from a diverse range of courses and college campuses they commented that they have good access to information, advice and guidance and can access a curriculum that is tailored to

meet their needs. They receive very good individualised support that is responsive to their individual needs; covering issues such as learning support, returning to learning, study skills and catch-up activities when needed. These students value the tutorial support they receive and find the college and its staff to be welcoming and enthusiastic.

### Quality of provision

The progress in making further improvements in teaching and learning, including teaching and learning mentors and e-learning innovators.	Significant progress
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The college has revised its lesson observation strategy to help achieve its stated objective of becoming a Beacon College and provide outstanding teaching and learning. The college has focused its efforts on improving teaching where it is most needed and is likely to produce better and more sustainable results. The lesson observation process is focused on supporting satisfactory tutors, new tutors and associate lecturers. The college is on-course to achieve its target of 80% of good and outstanding teaching.

To improve the teaching skills of the tutors, the college has made a substantial investment in resources and has extended the level of support available to tutors. The college has appointed 15 well-qualified and experienced teaching and learning mentors and has increased the number of e-learning innovators to 21. There are 55 designated subject experts in various parts of the college. These staff work with tutors flexibly and in a supportive way to develop and reinforce good teaching and learning practices. Tutors routinely reflect on their practice to improve. By observing experienced mentors in classes, tutors apply newly learnt skills including information and learning technology confidently to enhance the quality of their teaching and learning activities. For example, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and literacy tutors regularly use Skype and iPods to reinforce listening and speaking skills and engineering learners use Youtube to see the relevance of mathematical and scientific concepts to their daily lives. Other noticeable improvements include lesson preparation, questioning techniques, interactive learning, management of mixed age and ability classes and techniques to manage challenging behaviour.

The mentors and e-learning innovators work well as a team across the various sites of the college. They identify and share good practice and issues within teaching and learning. Teachers have access to an extensive range of staff development. Sharing of good practice from within and outside the college is well established. Tutors share learning resources, hints and tips to make sessions more effective, and support their peers with planning and peer observations.

The college has made a substantial investment in purchasing information learning technology resources and made excellent progress in making learning accessible to learners and staff through its highly flexible virtual learning environment. Some learners submit their assignments electronically at times convenient to them. Tutors make constructive comments on the assignments to help learners improve further.

Learners have an entitlement to information and learning technology and those who cannot afford computers are able to borrow a range of information technology equipment such as mini laptop computers from the college.

The progress in using target grades to raise achievement for 16–18 year old learners.	Reasonable progress
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In 2007/08, most 16–18 year old students achieved in line with expectations. In 2008/09 the college is making further progress to consolidate the use of target minimum grades to raise achievement levels. Learners are set realistic yet challenging target minimum grades at the start of their course based on a careful analysis of their previous achievements. Learners are encouraged to set their own personal target grades which are often higher than those predicted from their prior attainment. Their progress is monitored rigorously to ensure that they continue to make good progress and achieve their qualifications. Personal learning targets are reviewed and revised at regular intervals to provide further challenge to learners. In-year retention rates for this group of learners are high at 92% and up until January 2009, 62% of these learners were either exceeding or achieving their target minimum grade. This process has been highly effective in raising learner aspirations and ownership of their learning. Learners are very positive about their progress and are highly motivated.

The progress that has been made to ensure that students' progress is effectively monitored and that timely and effective support is provided for learners aged 16–18 at risk of not completing their course.	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in identifying and providing support for all 16–18 year old learners, including the use of electronic systems to track and monitor their progress. Initial assessments and, where necessary, diagnostic assessments are used well to provide timely and effective advice and guidance to ensure learners enrol on the most appropriate type of course. Tutors have accurate, current information on each student's needs which they can use to prepare their lessons.

Learners who are at risk of underachieving are supported well by subject tutors, personal tutors and heads of school. In the most difficult cases, managers provide assertive mentoring to such learners. Learners value the high levels of personal attention and care. For over 100 AS level students on the assertive mentoring programme, in-year retention rates are high at 92%. These learners take full advantage of a one hour tutorial each week with additional individual support as and when necessary. The reviews of learners' progress, through the students' assessment tracking and review fortnight that takes place once every term, are thorough. Learners take full responsibility for their own learning and often exceed their own expectations. This practice has been highlighted as an example of good practice on the Learning and Skills Improvement Service excellence gateway.

All staff have a high level of awareness of the characteristics of at-risk learners such as low confidence, high anxiety and extrovert behaviour as well as the times in the

year when the students are most likely to drop-out. Subject and personal tutors carefully monitor students' progress in each subject area as well as on general issues such as attendance, punctuality, motivation, attitude towards learning and contribution in the classes. They provide good levels of support to help learners' progress. This information is recorded on an extremely versatile database developed by college staff.

### Leadership and management

The progress in improving quality assurance arrangements to improve consistency of performance and the contribution of the standards boards.	Significant progress
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Over 20 standards boards are held between October and January to review the performance of all courses. These reviews are based on clearly set out performance reports, self-assessment and quality improvement plans. Each standards board completes a report which identifies courses that are performing well, emerging issues and adjustments to the curriculum offer, for example by discontinuing or replacing provision. Opportunities to share good practice through the standards boards are given a high priority. Curriculum/subject areas are encouraged to develop partnership arrangements with other high performing colleges to share good practice and undertake joint lesson observations. Effective communications, including management meetings and curriculum based and themed (such as pastoral, key skills BTEC and A levels) meetings ensure all relevant staff are involved in the college's drive to improve the quality of its provision. Curriculum reviews have shown, for example in science and mathematics, to be effective in improving outcomes for learners. The college's learner engagement strategy through curriculum focus groups, campus forums and surveys ensure student feedback supports quality improvement. The revised lesson observation programme prioritising support to targeted groups of teachers is improving standards through its focus on improving performance. This process is further enhanced by the involvement of observers from Matthew Boulton College.

The further progress in supporting part-time and visiting teachers	Significant progress
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At last year's monitoring visit, the college was assessed to be making reasonable progress in limiting the impact of staffing issues on the experience of adult learners in a number of sector subject areas. Since then, the proportion of part-time teachers on fractional contracts has increased. The college has also made significant progress in improving the quality of support for hourly paid teachers. They are now called associate lecturers and given equal status and parity of access with full-time teachers. Their rewards strategy has been revised and improved and ensures they can participate in all necessary development activities. They have good access to staff development opportunities based on an analysis of their needs. Resources, including desk facilities on all campuses and remote access to the college's virtual learning environment, are readily available. This group of staff receive prioritised

support from e-learning and teaching and learning mentors as well as curriculum specialist buddies.