

# Swindon College

## Focused monitoring visit report

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## FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

### Context and focus of visit

Swindon College is a medium-sized, general further education college, offering courses from pre-entry to post-graduate level. The college has approximately 5,850 further education learners and 500 learners on higher education courses. Attainment of school leavers in Swindon is below the national average and the college provides vocational education and training to meet local community needs and support progression to further and higher education and employment.

The college was last inspected in March 2009. At that inspection, overall effectiveness, achievement and standards, quality of provision, leadership and management and capacity to improve were all judged satisfactory. Of the six sector subject areas inspected, one was judged good, four satisfactory, and one inadequate. This report focuses on key area for improvement identified at the last inspection and other aspects of provision through pre-inspection analysis.

### Themes

#### Outcomes for learners

How much progress has the college made in raising success rates for students aged 16 to 18 on level 2 courses? Significant progress

Success rates for 16 to 18 year-olds on level 2 courses increased by 15 percentage points, rising from well below average in 2007/08 to just above the national average in 2008/09. Retention rates improved considerably as a result of strategies to ensure a better match between the curriculum and learners' needs. The college revised the GCSE programme to focus specifically on resits for English and mathematics, and implemented more consistent use of entry criteria to ensure that students are placed on the appropriate course and level. Students' achievement rates also improved in 2008/09 to 91%.

Overall success rates for students aged 16 to 18 have improved markedly over the last three years and were above the national average in 2008/09. Success rates increased by six percentage points on level 1 and five percentage points on level 3 courses. Managers acknowledge that value-added data for students on level 3 courses indicate that too few achieve higher grades.

How much progress has the college made in raising success rates for adults on level 1 courses? Reasonable progress

Success rates for adults on level 1 courses improved by eight percentage points in 2008/09, but remained just below the national average. Success rates for adults on level 1 Skills for Life courses improved by three percentage points but they declined for the small number of adult learners on ESOL courses.

Overall success rates for adult learners on long courses have remained fairly static over the last three years and were just above the national average in 2008/09. Success rates declined by one percentage point on both level 2 and 3 courses, but remained above national averages.

To what extent has the college reduced the variations in students' achievement between sector subject areas? Significant progress

The college has successfully reduced the previously wide variation between different sector subject areas noted at the last inspection. In 2007/08 success rates in over half the sector subject areas were below national average, with success rates which ranged from 55% to 80%. In 2008/09 success rates improved in most sector subject areas, with significant improvement in science and mathematics; construction; arts and media; and, English. Almost all areas are now at least in line with national averages. Success rates were above average in health, care and public services; retail; leisure, travel and tourism; arts and media; and, business.

#### Quality of provision

How much progress has the college made in raising the proportion of good or better teaching? Reasonable progress

The 2008/09 self-assessment report judged the quality of teaching and learning as satisfactory overall. The lesson observation scheme has been revised since the last inspection to ensure a more rigorous and consistent approach to grading. All observations result in an action plan for further improvement and staff whose lessons are graded satisfactory or unsatisfactory receive a high level of support from subject learning coaches and through well-targeted staff development activities. The proportion of lessons judged good or better was higher in 2008/09 than in the previous year. At the time of the monitoring visit, this had risen a little further.

Lesson observation records are detailed and comprehensive. Findings from lesson observations are well used to identify best practice to share and areas which require further improvement. These inform staff development planning, which is increasingly well-targeted to meet the needs of individual teachers and curriculum teams. The college is creating a culture where teachers are keen to improve, enjoy sharing their practice, and value the support available from subject learning coaches and development activities. All teachers have the opportunity to contribute to the teaching and learning theme group, whose recent work includes developing a series of practical hints and tips to support teachers' planning.

Strategies to increase student participation in lessons are having a positive impact. Teachers plan varied activities and are developing good resources to directly involve learners in lessons, including some creative use of information and communication technology. In a public services lesson, learners' presentations were filmed so that learners could evaluate each others' work and digital recordings are used well to

provide practical instruction for beauty therapy routines. The motor vehicle team is exploring ways of using learners' evaluation of lessons to ensure that content and teaching style meet learners' needs.

How much progress has been made in improving the quality of provision in information and communication technology? Reasonable progress

Provision in information and communication technology was judged inadequate at the last inspection. A detailed post-inspection action plan focuses clearly on addressing the key areas for improvement. Success rates improved by 10 percentage points in 2008/09 and were broadly in line with national averages.

More rigorous monitoring of attendance and rapid and appropriate interventions have helped to improve attendance rates. Retention is monitored frequently and is improving. Tracking of students' progress is thorough and an assessment schedule has been published to students and parents or carers. The quality and timeliness of assessments are more consistent and students appreciate the feedback they receive. Internal verification procedures have been improved.

Regular team meetings focus on attendance, retention, achievement and learners at risk of underachieving. Minutes of these meetings are distributed but on occasions lack detail and action points.

Lessons observed during the inspection were all judged by inspectors as at least satisfactory with some good features. Staff development has taken place to address the less effective aspects of teaching found at the last inspection and this is now beginning to have a positive impact. However, in some lessons, students who had achieved the pass criteria did not attend as they were satisfied with a pass rather than trying to improve their grade.

How much progress has been made in improving the use of targets to monitor and improve students' progress? Reasonable progress

The college is ensuring that electronic individual learning plans are used across the college. A recent audit indicates that many more students are now using these regularly to set and review targets for their work, though managers acknowledge that the current format may not be easily accessible to learners in all subject areas or course levels. Managers are refining the process and documentation to ensure that learning plans meet the needs of all subject areas and different course levels. Staff are working on setting more specific and measurable targets with students, though not all are yet sufficiently precise to focus students on how to improve. The college is now beginning to set more aspirational target grades with students to increase the proportion who achieve higher grades.

## Leadership and management

How much progress has the college made in improving the consistency and impact of quality assurance procedures and self-assessment? Significant progress

The self-assessment process has been revised significantly since the last inspection. The college has reinstated the role of course tutor, which has had a very positive impact on the quality of course management and self-assessment and in increasing levels of accountability. The 2008/09 self-assessment process involves curriculum teams through rigorous, termly course reviews, which focus appropriately on retention, achievement, and teaching and learning. Performance data are used well in most areas to support judgements made. Course reviews inform curriculum area self-assessment reports, which are validated by senior managers to ensure that strengths are supported by solid evidence and that all areas for improvement within a curriculum area are identified.

As a result, the college self-assessment report is largely evaluative and appropriately self-critical and records realistic grades for the provision. The post-inspection action plan is detailed and contains actions to address all of the areas for improvement highlighted at the last inspection. A designated staff member and a named senior manager have responsibility for each action to ensure progress is monitored and the action is completed. Monitoring at the time of the visit indicated that good progress was being made in most areas.

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