

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: South Birmingham College
Date of visit: 5 July 2007

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment 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 steps is the college taking to maintain high success rates at levels 1 and 2 for long courses and to bring level 3 to comparable levels?

- Success rates at level 2 and 3 for long courses increased substantially between 2003/04 and 2005/06. At level 2, the increase was to well above the national average and to just above at level 3. The level 1 long course success rate, although only increasing slightly between 2003/04 and 2005/06 was well above the national average. To maintain the high success rates at level 1 and level 2, managers continue to monitor rates particularly closely and take effective action to remedy any issues.
- Managers recognise that success rates at level 3, especially for adult learners, although increasing significantly, are not moving to well above the national average. They conducted a thorough analysis of the reasons for this. To improve the success rate in 2006/07, managers have strengthened arrangements for initial assessment, including a more thorough analysis of what the learner wants to achieve at the end of their course. Managers have made available a range of introductory courses to prepare learners better for level 3 provision, ensured the college provides further additional learning support, especially for language, and moved course calendars to meet more effectively the needs of learners. At the time of the annual assessment visit, it was too early to assess the full impact of these actions. However, the college's data on retention rates for 2006/07 shows a marked increase.

What actions has the college taken to improve framework success rates in work-based learning?

- Framework success rates for work-based learning in 2004/05 and 2005/06 were unsatisfactory and well below the national average; an issue clearly recognised by managers and staff. To resolve the problem, managers and staff took a number of actions. They strengthened the co-ordination and arrangements to link together tuition and assessment for technical certificates, key skills and the NVQ. Managers and staff check more thoroughly if employers are able to provide the full range of skills training and assessment evidence for the NVQ in the workplace. Where there are gaps, staff now provide additional skills training and assessment. College staff visit the workplace regularly to reinforce the employer's role in supporting learners during training. Subject sector areas with better work-based learning success rates share their good practice with the less successful areas. These actions have been effective. Data for the first 10 months of 2006/07 from the LSC show that success rates are now around the national average and have increased significantly compared with 2005/06.

Quality of education and training

What progress is the college making in improving teaching and learning for key skills?

- At the last inspection, an area for improvement was teaching and learning for key skills. Managers have taken action to remedy this issue. Particular concerns were the variable quality of key skills tuition and low success rates. Advanced practitioners now work with teachers to improve key skills teaching and learning, particularly to promote the sharing of good practice. Teachers integrate more thoroughly the teaching of key skills with the learners' main area of study, especially in vocational subjects. Managers and staff have improved the arrangements for electronic testing, registration and certification of tests and portfolios, and internal verification. Success rates were poor for key skills in 2005/06. However, college data for 2006/07 show that success rates, although still low, are substantially improved and similar to the national average.

How effective is the use of information learning technology (ILT) at the college?

- The 2005/06 self-assessment report noted a key area for improvement in the use of ILT in some lessons. Managers have taken substantial action to resolve this issue. Investment in ILT over the last two year has been marked. Training for staff to improve their use of ILT is frequent and regular. Within sector subject areas, staff use a variety of good approaches with ILT. These include the preparation and presentation of learning materials, the innovative use of these materials in lessons through ILT by teachers and learners, visits to educationally relevant chat rooms and the checking of understanding and knowledge. All course reviews make sure the use of ILT is effective. Since the last inspection, managers and staff have ensured the use of the college's virtual learning environment is no longer restricted to some sector subject areas only.

Has the college maintained the strong support for learners?

- The 2005/06 self-assessment report recognises that support for learners is strong. Managers and staff have maintained this strength and made further improvements. Support services are accessible and responsive to learners' needs. The range of services for learners across the college's different sites is comprehensive. Partnerships with external agencies to support learners are strong and effective. The range of additional support is good including for those with learning disabilities and/or difficulties. Lead tutors regularly and effectively provide staff development to improve the quality of tutorials.
- Managers have taken further action to improve support for learners. A particular feature of staff development is the reinforcement of staff awareness of how to support learners with disabilities. Managers and staff have strengthened initial assessment to ensure that not only are individual learning and support needs recognised but learners' goals after completing their course are also noted more effectively. The college has appointed additional staff to support courses where retention and attendance are low. Managers and staff are working effectively to ensure admission responses from some subject areas are timelier; an issue noted in the self-assessment report.

Leadership and management

Have managers sustained rigorous self-assessment since the last inspection?

- A key strength at the last inspection was rigorous self-assessment. Managers and staff have maintained this strength. The self-assessment process is well established, systematic and thorough, and is an important component of the college's quality improvement arrangements. The process makes full use of the results of lesson observations and comprehensive data on learners' success, achievement and retention rates. Self-assessment effectively involves staff at all levels, managers and governors. The process is strengthened by checks on evidence and judgement by validation panels of senior managers and governors. The self-assessment report for 2005/06 was informative and judgemental. It provides a mostly accurate assessment of the college's strengths and areas for improvement.

Any themes from the pre-visit analysis not explored during the visit:

- No

Any other observations from the visit not identified in the pre-visit analysis:

- No