MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Sutton Coldfield College

Date of visit: 2 June 2008

Context

Sutton Coldfield College is a large general further education college in northeast 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. This sixth form college is 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 Bolton College is planned to be completed shortly. The college has reorganised much of its work arrangements in response to these mergers, including a new management structure and harmonisation of processes based on maximising the benefits of best practice. Further significant infrastructure changes are planned which include the construction of a new campus. The college has Centre of Vocational Excellence status in integrated manufacturing, adult care, business and entrepreneurship and has achieved the Training Quality standard.

Some 54% of the 10,420 full-time equivalent students enrolled in 2006/07 were female, 63.5% were aged under 19 and 38% were from Black and minority ethnic heritages. One third of students study full-time. The college offers courses in 14 sector subject areas, with 36% of the provision at Level 3. Birmingham still has engineering and manufacturing sectors, but recent growth has been in the professional, leisure, services and new technologies sectors. 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 grades for 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.

Achievement and standards

What is the impact of strategies to improve success rates on long courses, particularly in science and mathematics, and short courses, particularly in health, public services and care, construction and engineering?	Reasonable progress

The college has made reasonable progress to improve success rates. Between 2004/05 and 2006/07 long course success rates for students aged 16 to 18 have

continued to improve to above national averages. Long Level 1 success rates are high. Success rates on Level 2 long qualifications are above the national average and at Level 3 are at the national average. Long course success rates for adult students have increased and are in line with national averages. Retention rates for both students aged 16 to 18 and adults are mostly good. Achievement rates are satisfactory. Success rates for science and mathematics have improved and are in line with national averages. In 2007/08, curriculum teams have reviewed their curriculum offer to better meet the needs of learners and revised entry criteria for GCSEs and AS level provision. Clear information, advice and guidance are provided for students by subject tutors. Improvements to support arrangements include additional workshops and ongoing assessments. The college's arrangements for the setting and use of target minimum grades have been improved. In-year assessments indicate improvements in student achievement.

Following a curriculum review of poorly performing short courses the college has introduced an improved and redesigned curriculum offer with greater emphasis on meeting employer organisational needs. Entry criteria are more explicit with particular emphasis on levels of prior experience needed. Service level agreements are used well to improve employer commitment and support. Short course performance reporting and monitoring and administration have improved.

Have work-based learning outcomes improved?	Significant progress

Progress to improve work-based learning outcomes is significant. Overall framework success rates have improved significantly since 2004/05 and are well above national averages for both advanced apprentices and apprentices. Just under half of advanced apprentices achieve their framework by the target date. Timely achievement for apprentices is low. The college has made further improvements to this provision in 2007/08, with monthly reporting to employers and increased regularity of progress reviews. Strategies to address timeliness issues linked to key skills tests and assessment opportunities are in place. The number of Train to Gain learners achieving their key learning objectives in 2007/08 to date is satisfactory.

What progress has the college made in improving key skills achievements?	Significant progress

The college has made significant progress in improving the achievement of key skills. Level 2 success rates have improved considerably in the last three years and for application of number, communication and information and communication technology (ICT) are very good. Success rates for Level 2 wider key skills in improving own learning and performance and working with others are outstanding. Success rates for Level 3 key skills in communication are satisfactory but remain low for a small number of learners taking Level 3 ICT. A number of factors have effectively contributed to this success. These include an integrated approach for A level learners, discrete timetabled classes and integrated key skills on vocational programmes, more and better qualified assessors and flexible assessment practices for advanced apprentices. Some of the other positive aspects which have supported

improvements in key skills are the availability of online tests for learners at Level 1 and 2, a requirement for the learners to take two mock examinations before registration for a test, better qualified and experienced tutors and a high degree of learner and staff enthusiasm.

Has the college improved student punctuality and attendance?	Significant progress

Attendance and punctuality are taken very seriously. The college identified that punctuality and attendance were a concern in a number of curriculum areas and effective remedial action has meant that both attendance and punctuality have improved. The college has successfully encouraged learners to take full responsibility for their learning and expects very high standards of them. Learners are expected to achieve 100% attendance and ensure a prompt start to their lessons. This message is constantly reinforced to learners and their parents. Attendance and punctuality are key performance indicators for all learners. The college has established a number of support and monitoring measures to ensure that it reaches its targets. For example, it has reduced the time by which the learners are marked as really late from 15 to 10 minutes and tutors routinely followed up learners' explanations for lateness. Learners and tutors use text messages to inform each other about non-attendance. A strong team of mentors explore ways in which they can offer help and support to learners with personal issues such as care responsibilities and transport. Electronic registers instantly record and provide information on attendance and punctuality by class and learner. Managers monitor the progress of those whose attendance and punctuality does not improve. Parents are also informed about the progress of their children.

Quality of provision

What strategies has the college introduced to engage learners more effectively in lessons and meet individual needs?	Significant progress

The college has adopted a broad range of teaching and support strategies to effectively engage learners in lessons and meet their individual needs. A thorough initial and diagnostic assessment identifies their starting point and learning styles accurately. Tutors use this information to plan detailed schemes of work and lesson plans which include relevant assessment methods, resources and differentiation strategies for the less able as well as stretch exercises for the gifted and talented learners. They use integrated ICT, including mobile phones, very effectively to make the learning fit the modern learning style of the learners. A vast array of information is very easily available for tutors, managers and learners on the electronic course management system, the virtual network of the college. It is used well by learners and tutors alike. The college has invested heavily in learning resources; for example by purchasing 1,000 small portable computers to loan to the learners. These computers have wireless access to the virtual network.

Support for the tutors to sharpen their classroom skills to engage and motivate learners is good. The college has established a strong group of 10 of the best teachers to share best practice in teaching and provide support to the tutors on a group as well as individual basis. Observation of teaching and learning is rigorous and takes full account of the effective engagement of learners. Observations also form the basis for staff appraisal and staff training. Staff development on promoting excellence in the classroom is delivered on a regular basis by college and external experts. Some of the examples of well attended staff development events include sessions on 'settling in activities', active schemes of work, differentiation, integrating mobile technology, using the virtual network, recapping in sessions and using assessment effectively. Tutors have made effective use of this learning to engage learners fully into learning and they make good progress in lessons. They are guided and supported extensively to make faster progress. Additional literacy, language and numeracy support is provided effectively to the learners in a variety of formats. Learners receiving such support make better progress than those who do not.

Is there evidence of improvements in the use of target setting and action planning with learners to improve success rates?	Reasonable progress

The college has made reasonable progress in the use of target setting and action planning with learners to improve success rates since the previous inspection. The progress of about two thirds of full-time students is monitored using an electronic system. This system will be used college wide as from September 2008. Staff use a range of tools to quickly set a target minimum grade for each learner at the beginning of their course. Copies of these grades along with the results of initial and/or diagnostic assessment are given to the tutors to plan their lessons and support for the learners. Records on electronic registers instantly provide tutors with up-to-date information on each learner's performance in areas such as punctuality, attendance, attitude, contribution to the class and homework. Tutors monitor the performance of learners rigorously. Extra support is provided promptly when needed. Those learners who under perform against any of the recorded measures are supported to improve. Senior managers monitor the performance of persistently under performing learners and set them challenging targets. Learners value these levels of care and mentoring and make the progress required of them to achieve their minimum target grades. Databases are used very effectively and promptly to map learners examinations results and convey these to the tutors and managers. The college has well developed plans to integrate assessment and feedback into the electronic course management system.

Leadership and management

What is the effectiveness of strategies to limit the impact of staffing issues on adult learners' experience in a number of sector subject areas?	Reasonable progress

The college had identified that staff issues in 2006/07 had impacted on learners' experience in a number of sector subject areas. The college has made reasonable progress to address these issues. A new college management structure was introduced in 2007/08. Staff have been re-organised into sector subject areas rather than customer/client focused groups. This has resulted in better co-ordination of teaching within sector subject areas and between sites. Team working is much improved and better meets the needs of learners. The college employs a significant number of visiting tutors to support adult programmes and has improved its arrangements to support them. Plans are in place to further improve this support. These include greater use of fractional contracts for part-time teachers, providing visiting teachers with access to resources and staff development through technological solutions and improvements in coaching and mentoring arrangements. It is too early to assess the full impact of these measures.

What is the impact of the college's arrangements for the management of skills for life provision post merger?	Significant progress

At the last monitoring visit it was too early to judge the impact of the college's arrangements for the management of the skills for life provision post merger. The college has made significant progress since then. A skills for life strategy group oversee the implementation of the college's strategy. Infrastructure changes which took place in 2006/07 included the development of a study centre and significantly increased additional learning support at the Josiah Mason centre. The whole college approach to the implementation of skills for life ensures learners are enrolled onto the right programme. They receive faster screening and identification of their needs. For students aged 16 to 18 the college encourages greater involvement of parents. On-programme systems for managing students with additional needs have improved. In all discrete skills for life provision tutors place greater emphasis on contextualising learning to employability and social cohesion.

In 2006/07, success rates in literacy and numeracy were high. The college evaluated the success rates of both those who received additional support and those who did not. The analysis showed that those receiving support mostly outperformed those who did not. English for speakers of other languages success rates continue to improve and are satisfactory.