

## Access and Participation Statement Higher Education

### Background

South and City College is a large college in Birmingham with two university centres located at our Digbeth and Longbridge campuses. Both of our university centres are easily accessible for all communities within Birmingham and the West Midlands region being close to excellent transport links for the region and the rest of the UK.

The university centres focus on different subject areas, STEM related courses such as engineering, sports science and performance, civil and building services engineering are located at our Longbridge campus. Part time teacher training courses are also located here. Digbeth campus has a broad range of subjects such as Popular Music, Business, Computing, Education and Healthcare. All of our courses are vocational and aim to support local students into careers or further study, although some programmes linked to our University partners also recruit nationally and internationally. Courses are offered at level 4, 5 and honours degree.

One of the key aims of higher education at the college is to engage local communities and students to study at a higher level and support students to develop the knowledge and skills to have better opportunities for future careers.

There are challenges and barriers for West Midland's residents to engage in higher level education and training. The West Midlands Skills Report (2021) <sup>i</sup> identifies that there was decline in students studying at level 3 in further education between 2016 and 2019 and a very slight increase in students study at level 4 during the same time period, however the number of students studying and completing a further education level 4 qualification remained very low at around 2,800 students.

The report continues to identify that higher education over the last five years has been expanding rapidly in the West Midlands region, with a 15.5% increase in the five year period to 2019, double the growth rate of the sector. Graduate retention in the region though, is weaker than the UK average and this means fewer students are staying for both study and employment in the region, the data says 24.3% of students study and stay for employment in the region when compared with a nationwide percentage of 29.3% who stay in their home region.

The West Midlands region also has fewer residents qualified to level 4 and is below the national rate by around 6%<sup>ii</sup>.

	West Midlands (Met County)	West Midlands	Great Britain
NVQ Level 4 and above	34.7%	37.1%	43.1%

Source: ONS Annual Population Survey

This access and participation statement aims to review our higher education courses and the data on our students'. We review our courses through data on student characteristics to identify areas where the college is performing well and to provide information on our aims for the challenges and improvements we will focus on using the key themes of access, success and progression. Data will be drawn from information on student characteristics and further information is also published by the Office for Students.<sup>iii</sup>

## **Access and Participation Priorities 2020-2023**

The College will focus on:

### **Access**

- Clear and simple fee information
- A fair admissions process with accessible and clear advice and guidance, information on admission requirements, and the reduction of barriers to access.
- Support progression for existing level 3 students to access higher education
- Reversing the declining enrolments on some technical level courses.

### **Success**

- Improve continuation rates for full time students
- Improve the continuation rates for groups of students whose success rates demonstrate a significant gap:
  - Black/ Black British- Caribbean students
  - Male students
  - Learning difficulty and/or disability (Dyslexia, Asperger's syndrome)
- Reverse the dip in pass rates for mature learners over 30 who studied in academic year 2020
- Continue to support the high number of higher apprentices who achieve their apprenticeship and achieve positive outcomes and high grades.

### **Progression**

- Continue to support the high number of students to access further study and employment

## **How the college will improve access, success and participation**

### **Access**

The College aims to keep a clear and simple fee structure and information for students, setting fees for all directly funded full time courses at the same fee level per year. These fees are clearly signposted on course pages. Part time student fees for directly funded courses are now aligned across year groups and course start dates. This lower fee level aims to encourage underrepresented groups to engage in higher education and provide value for money to study locally.

The admissions process for higher education has been simplified, students are able to apply directly to the College promoting progression from level 3 courses and removing the barrier of applying through UCAS. This benefits students who may yet be unsure of engaging with higher education or who may be from a low income family where the UCAS fee may be prohibitive because of financial circumstances.

Where possible interviews have been removed from the admissions process as they may be a barrier to applicants, instead providing good advice and guidance to applicants is central to the admission process aiming to empower applicants who meet the entrance criteria to decide if the course is appropriate for their chosen career or future.

The college holds regular progression weeks for students to discuss their next steps. Tutors engage with students through a tutorial programme, and university level staff engage with level 3 learners through master classes, events, student conferences, and visit classes to raise awareness. The college is targeting a small number of subject areas that have experienced strong competition and by scheduling higher education staff to teach on level 3 programmes to build relationship with students. The College engages with Aimhigher events and has a dedicated outreach member of staff located at the Longbridge campus to support students from underrepresented groups to engage with higher education.

## **Success**

Following successful improvement in continuation rates in 2020, the COVID pandemic has provided many challenges for students and this has led to a decline in 2021 of students passing their first year and continuing into year 2 of their programme. This was impacted by lost learning when studying at level 3 and the need to study remotely. Some students thrived studying online, however some students found significant barriers to their learning, such as having to share access to computing resources (resolved by issuing students with computing equipment). Many students had family or parenting commitments which prevented engagement with scheduled classes, and this is reflected in the reduction in pass rates for mature learners. Tutors recorded online lessons for those that could not always engage at the time of their lessons and far more individual tutorials were held by academic staff and students. Classes are now back on campus and additional workshop sessions have been timetabled.

Higher education students' attendance and engagement is more closely monitored by academic staff and students who are experiencing difficulties or may be at risk of not completing are reviewed weekly. Academic staff follow up on poor engagement and attendance and contact with students is made at an earlier stage.

A more holistic review of students is carried out at module and assessment boards linked to at risk monitoring and strategies employed to support students.

New graduate teaching assistants have been engaged to support student outcomes and provide additional study and skills support. The impact of the assistances will be monitored through student feedback and outcomes at module and course level. Part time learners can also access the graduate teaching assistants and receive support through an academic tutor.

Students with a disability or learning difficulty are identified as part of the admissions process and encouraged to develop a support plan with the Student Services Team, academic tutors are able to access support plans online which allows targeted strategies to be developed in teaching and assessment.

## **Progression**

There are high progression rates for students into employment or further study. The college has further developed partnerships with universities with the view of students progressing either to top-up degrees or into post graduate studies from the honours degrees taught at the College. Clear progression routes linked to courses, careers and job roles are central to partnership development.

Plans for employment hubs have been made bringing support and advice into a hub at each campus.

The college is developing more widening participation data resources to improve information at course level.

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<sup>i</sup> West Midlands Local Skills Report. Evidence Base – April 2021. Available at:  
[://www.wmca.org.uk/media/4815/wm-local-skills-report\\_evidence-base.pdf](http://www.wmca.org.uk/media/4815/wm-local-skills-report_evidence-base.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Labour Market profile – West midlands (Met County) 2020. Available at:  
<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/Imp/la/1967128614/report.aspx?#tabquals>

<sup>iii</sup> Office for Students Access and participation data dash board. Accessible at:  
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>