

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: Stoke-on-Trent College
Date of visit: 24 January 2007

This feedback contains brief findings from the annual assessment visit (AAV). 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 judgements can be made about the college's performance in 2005/06 and current trends?

- At the time of the AAV, with some performance data still outstanding, college performance in 2005/06 was broadly similar to the previous year. The overall success rate remained at 72% and the long course success rate at 62%, in line with the national average in 2004/05. The long course success rate for students aged 16 to 18 improved from 56% to 59%, but remains six percentage points below the 2004/05 national average. The long course success rate for adult students fell from 65% to 62%, but remains two percentage points above the 2004/05 national average. Overall, success rates on short courses were similar to the previous year and remain above the national averages. The success rate on very short courses fell two percentage points, but the success rate on courses of between five and 24 weeks improved by the same extent. Both types of short course have about 19,000 enrolments.
- Retention of students aged 16 to 18 was similar to the previous year and is well below the national level. The achievement rate for this age group improved by five percentage points and is above the national level. For adult students, retention fell by seven percentage points and is now below the national level, whereas the achievement rate improved and is above the national level. Improving retention is clearly the key challenge facing the college. The success rate for male students aged 16 to 18 shows good improvement in 2005/06. College data also indicate that the key skills success rate improved significantly to 46%, which although still low is well above the national average. Average attendance improved significantly from 79% to 84% in 2005/06 and the improvement was reflected across full-time and part-time courses.
- There is a need to approach data carefully because the college also produces performance reports which include all students and not just those who are funded by the learning and skills council (LSC). These data are not directly comparable to the college performance report (CPR). Very

substantial numbers of students, mostly employer-based, are not funded by the LSC. These reports can lead to different judgements from those based on the CPR and on college data where inspection rules have been applied. For example, they would show slight improvement rather than slight decline in both the overall success rate and the long course success rate in 2005/06.

What judgements can be made about achievements by work-based learners? How successfully is the college addressing those areas of work-based learning (WBL) with lower success rates?

- The college's framework success rate has increased steadily over the past three years in line with the national trend. It has improved from 33% in 2003/04 to 50% in 2005/06, which is around the national average. Success rates for both apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships show a similar trend, although the rate of improvement for advanced apprenticeships is greater. Timely success rates have only improved slightly over the last three years and are below national averages.
- There is considerable variability within and between curriculum areas. In construction, for example, success rates for advanced apprenticeships have increased dramatically and are well above national averages, but success rates for apprenticeships have declined steadily and are below the national level. Framework success rates in most curriculum areas do not show consistent improvement and in all areas a marked difference between advanced apprenticeship and apprenticeship success rates is evident. There are no curriculum areas with success rates above the national level for both apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships. The college is addressing this by closely monitoring learners' progress through the use of a colour-coded report and regular review meetings between the WBL manager and course teams. Having met its success rate target for 2005/06, the college has set a higher target of 60% for 2006/07.

Quality of education and training

From evidence available, how well do teachers plan lessons to meet the needs of students across the ability range?

- Schemes of work and lesson plans are emerging from a period of transition as new templates become established across the college. The intention is to promote the more consistent use of good practice through the adoption of common, well designed templates for course and lesson planning.
- Sampling indicates that good practice in written lesson planning is evident in the majority of curriculum areas, but not all. Schemes of work and lesson plans are sufficiently clear and detailed to facilitate class cover, show a good variety of student activities being used and demonstrate that

most teachers identify clear learning objectives for each lesson. In many cases, teachers now identify differentiated learning objectives for different ability levels, although some are better than others at ensuring these reflect genuine levels of ability and the college recognises that more work is needed before they are properly embedded in the learning activities.

- As yet, the following areas are under-developed within lesson planning: matching learning activities more explicitly to students' preferred learning styles; putting more emphasis on evaluating lessons, and involving students in this process; making more extensive use of notes about the needs and behaviour of individual students; and incorporating the deployment of learning support assistants into lesson plans.

How well is information and learning technology (ILT) used to enhance the learning experience for students?

- Since the last inspection, when the use of ILT was identified as an area for development, senior managers have given a strong lead in promoting its use. In the last year, the college has invested substantially in its ILT infrastructure. All classrooms are well equipped and have a data projector and smart board linked to a personal computer. All teachers have undertaken basic training in the use of this equipment and ILT champions and faculty educational technologists in each programme area provide ongoing encouragement and support, particularly for course teams as they develop appropriate ways of using ILT to enhance their own curriculum in line with the college's ILT strategy. Work on more than 300 such projects is currently ongoing across the college.
- The evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning within the SAR includes some positive judgements about the use of ILT. The honest and self-critical evaluation indicates that whilst some curriculum areas are making good use of the available resources, others are aware of the need to develop further. Development of the college's virtual learning environment is in its early stages.

What evidence is there that the college self assesses the quality of its provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities accurately?

- The college only makes small, discrete provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities (SLDD). There is no full-time provision and currently 122 part-time adult learners attend community venues one day per week on the skills for adult living programme. Due to a combination of funding changes and the intention of strengthening vocational learning for these students, the course was re-launched at the start of 2006/07, with the focus on pre-entry level milestones 6, 7 and 8.
- The 2005/06 course review provides a concise and honest evaluation of the provision. At that time the course was not securely located within a

programme area and this may explain why there is no reference to SLDD provision in the college SAR. The course review indicates high retention and high levels of student satisfaction, but a very low proportion of good or better lessons. Students made slow progress because lessons did not challenge them to learn or practise new things. The course is now clearly located within the Skills for Life faculty, although it is not entirely clear which programme area it belongs in.

- A new course manager and revamped teaching team are making improvements, well supported by an external consultant. Procedures and documentation have been reviewed and revised and a concise and appropriate development plan is being implemented. Sampling of students' work revealed a good range of skills.
- It is unusual for a college of this size, particularly one based in a city such as Stoke, to have no full-time SLDD provision for 16 to 25 year olds; although the tertiary college in the neighbouring town does have such provision and has developed strong links with local special schools. The college and the local LSC should investigate how many young people with learning difficulties and disabilities are represented in the high proportion of young people aged 16 to 19 in Stoke who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in order to be confident that there is not a significant unmet need.

How effective a contribution does the college make to extending vocational learning opportunities for students aged 14 to 16 in the locality?

- At the last inspection, the college was working with a substantial number of school pupils and was judged to have effective links with schools. Since then the number of students aged 14 to 16 attending college courses has substantially increased and the college's schools link and increased flexibility programmes currently accommodate some 1,100 young learners. Achievements are very good on these programmes, with an average pass rate of 80% and a 65% progression rate into further education, mainly at the college. The college offers courses for this age group across all its curriculum areas.
- The college is also central to the local schools' consortium for delivery of BTEC qualifications and contributes its verification and quality improvement expertise. There are currently 1,000 learners on this programme, which has yet to be completed by the first full cohort. The college also runs a 'bridge' programme for disaffected young people, which has suffered from low retention. However, 83% of the students who do complete this programme progress with a positive outcome. In 2006, a young apprenticeship programme was started in construction, and health and social care, with 30 learners in each area.

Leadership and management

Does the college have good procedures for obtaining feedback from students? Do students' views influence college developments appropriately?

- The college has a good range of methods for gathering student feedback. The main vehicle is an annual student survey, which draws on a substantial sample of students, to evaluate their perceptions of the quality of provision and services across the college. The headline results, both positives and negatives, are displayed for students' information, although not many are aware of them. Results are analysed at faculty, programme area and course level and lead to the formulation of appropriate actions for improvement.
- There are some clear examples of tangible improvements resulting from the surveys. For example, enrichment activities were better publicised during 2005/06 because of the low student awareness revealed and the 2006 survey showed a significant shift in students' awareness. In addition, each faculty holds a termly feedback meeting attended by student course representatives. Concerns and issues are immediately addressed or action planned. The student union has representatives on the academic board and the governing body. The college also encourages and supports groups for Black and Asian students and for students with disabilities, whose views inform the equality and diversity group. However, managers recognise that the views of all students on equality and diversity issues are not canvassed.

To what extent does the college comply with current child protection regulations and good practice?

- The college is very largely compliant with current regulations and guidance and demonstrates much good practice in safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults. There are three designated child protection officers who have undertaken, and continue to undertake, significant training for their role, and a recently designated governor. All staff have received basic training and procedures are well understood, but the more substantial training, including recognising signs of abuse, has so far been provided to 375 out of 1,200 staff, with those having most contact with young people being prioritised.
- Child protection has a high profile in the college. The procedures and designated officers are widely and clearly signposted. The 'safeguarding students' policy has recently been up-dated and approved by the local board. The effectiveness of the college's efforts is evidenced in the significant increase in referrals and disclosures this academic year. This has created a considerable workload for the three designated staff and it

is appropriate for the college to be considering increasing their capacity and providing professional supervision for them.

- The college's approach to checking staff backgrounds goes beyond the minimum requirements; standard disclosures are required for all directly employed staff and students working with young people. There is a single central record of all staff checks, but the college currently relies on verbal assurances from its cleaning contractors that all their staff have been checked.

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

- At the last AAV consideration was given to whether the college might have become excessively severe in its grading of lessons in the process of converting from the seven- to four-point grading scale. The grade profile resulting from observations in 2005/06 showed 62% of lessons to be good or better, 35% to be satisfactory and 3% to be inadequate, a much more modest profile than in previous years. To date the 2006/07 grade profile shows improvement with 69% good, 29% satisfactory and 2% inadequate.