

ANNUAL ASSESSMENT VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of College: St Helens
Date of visit: 23 May 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

The SAR and the last inspection report agree that teaching is good, and support for learners is outstanding. Why are overall success rates on long courses average or below?

- The college has a strong management focus on improving the success rates of its students, and has acted to improve them. Analysis of learner performance identified high levels of early withdrawal at the end of the first year of long courses. The curriculum offer has been re-configured to offer one-year courses with clear progression routes. These have been found to improve learner motivation and progression, as well as improving success rates. Changes have been made to recruitment and enrolment processes, to better match learners to courses, and support for learners has been enhanced by the appointment of student liaison officers and mentors.
- From a low base two years ago, the college has improved success rates on long courses for both students aged 16 to 18 and adult learners. Success rates in 2005/06 were at or above national averages. Particularly marked is the improvement in success rates for 16 to 18 year olds at level 3, where success rates have risen from 49 to 66%, compared to a national average of 65%. The decline in level 1 success rates has been reversed, and the college predicts an overall success rate of 70% at level 1 for 2006/07. Success rates are now satisfactory.

Have there been any further improvements in in-year retention and success rates for 2006/07?

- College data indicates that the improvements in success rates are likely to be sustained in the current year.

What is being done to improve framework achievement in work based learning (WBL)?

- The college has taken steps to improve achievement, introducing 'framework leaders' into each of the delivery areas, with responsibility for co-ordinating WBL programmes and improving achievement. They meet every six weeks to share good practice. College data shows that the 2006/07 overall framework success rate is 56% against a national average of 54%. This is an improvement of ten percentage points over last year. Overall success rates are now satisfactory. However pockets of underperformance remain, for example, framework achievement rates in leisure travel and tourism (Sports Studies) apprenticeship programmes remain poor. The College has made the decision to withdraw from this provision and there are currently small numbers of learners involved.

What progress has been made to improve success rates for key skills?

- Key skills success rates are improving. In 2004/05 and 2005/06 mistakes were made with the enrolment of learners for key skills qualifications, which meant that many were enrolled on programmes which they were not actually taking. The problem was identified in 2006 and enrolments were adjusted manually in 2006/07 to reduce this. Achievement in 2005/06 was 29%. This year success rates are currently 23%, the college estimates that final success rate will be 47%

Quality of education and training

What steps has the college taken so far to respond to the issues raised in the inspection report?

- The college has developed action plans to address all issues raised in the report. In particular the college strongly focussed on improving success rates. Where areas for improvement are identified, the college quality system initiates a Quality Acceleration Project (QAP). These are short duration projects which focus on specific improvements. The self-assessment process has been reviewed and re-focussed and the procedures for the observation of teaching and learning have been enhanced. Measures to improve the quality of teaching include the work of subject learning coaches in most curriculum areas. They have helped to increase standardisation of teaching and learning approaches and improve the use of learning resources.

What are the outcomes of the current teaching observation process?

- The process for observing teaching and learning has been strengthened. The judgements of observers are centrally moderated and are now better used to inform self-assessment and staff development plans. There are external partnership arrangements for peer observations, and in the next academic year the college will participate in a regional self-regulation programme. In the current year, the proportion of good or better teaching has so far declined very slightly, from 74% to 72%. The proportion of satisfactory teaching has remained constant at 25%. There is little evidence within the teaching observation scheme of the promotion of differentiation in planning and delivery of learning.

How has the college developed its use of information and communications technology (ICT) within teaching and learning since the last SAR? How well used is the virtual learning environment (VLE)?

- The staff laptop scheme has issued over 300 computers to staff, with appropriate training. This has helped to increase the use of ICT in teaching and learning, and to overcome a major barrier to the integration of VLE resources into teaching programmes. The college has continued to develop its VLE, and this is now making a significant contribution to learning. Staff report that the use of the VLE increases learner motivation, and learners appreciate facilities such as pre-testing and access to learning materials. However, some students report difficulties in accessing the system due to shortage of computers or old and slow machines.
- The college has used quality acceleration projects to speed up the introduction of e-learning to curriculum areas. Teachers report that the use of electronic whiteboards is well embedded.

Has access to ILT resources improved? Are there plans for further developments in this area?

- Access in most areas is good. In the last year £300k has been spent on 400 new computers and IT infrastructure. The ratio of computers to students is now 1 to 4. The college is implementing a wireless network which should cover all areas in 2007/08.

How well delivered are key skills, both in full-time courses and WBL?

- The college has devolved management of key skills from the centre to departments. Specialist key skills staff are in place in each department, but much of the teaching is delivered within the main qualification. Students in work-based learning and on full-time courses report that key skills are integrated and relevant to their main subject. They were well aware of the requirements and the progress they have made.

What opportunities are available for enrichment of the curriculum, and how well attended are enrichment activities?

- A range of enrichment activities is offered to learners at the start of the academic year, including sports, Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme and computer aided design. Some learners report that they are not allocated to their chosen activity. Enrichment activities are now being recorded on the e-register system, but the college recognises that improvement is needed in recording participation and achievement in this area.

How effective are arrangements for gathering the views of learners, including part-time and work-based learners?

- Improvements have been made in arrangements for gathering learners' views, in particular the provision of on-line questionnaires. However, these have been introduced recently, so have yet to be used by most learners. The new arrangements will provide course teams with a more detailed analysis of the views of learners, for use in their self assessment.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made with plans to improve learner tracking?

- Improvements have been made to learner tracking systems. Electronic registers are now in place. Student liaison officers work with course teams to identify learners at risk and provide or refer them to assistance. Programme managers now receive regular data reports on learners' progress. They meet regularly with their teams with a standard agenda which includes student success and progress against the development plan.

How successful are efforts to provide for young people not in education, training or employment?

- Changes to the curriculum to provide more level 1 courses and open college network provision address the needs of this group, with identified progression routes. A special programme has been devised to cater for learners with challenging behaviour (Take 2) which includes the Duke of Edinburgh Programme. Next year a pre-16 engagement programme will be provided for up to 150 learners.

Improvements in the availability and quality of data.

- Course leaders report significant improvements in the data available to them on learner progress. Data is now much more reliable, accessible, and user-friendly. It is available on the intranet, updated weekly, and is available at programme level. Staff have been trained in using data, and are increasingly familiar with the performance data for their programmes. Where data reports show that a course is below target for retention or achievement, the course team is provided with support to identify the problem and improve results.

How has the SAR process been developed to improve rigour?

- A new SAR process has been designed and implementation has begun. Key improvements are increased use of data at programme level, greater use of teaching observation and student feedback results, and stronger moderation of grades. The college is also participating in a regional self-regulation project which will increase external moderation.

How are links with local schools developing, and what action has been taken to prepare for the introduction of specialist diplomas?

- Relationships with schools are strong and continue to develop. In the current year there are over 300 pupils attending accredited training at the college. The college offers special provision for learners with challenging behaviour. For 2007/08 the college has won a contract to deliver young apprenticeships to 30 learners, and will provide for 300 year 10 and 11 pupils. It is also the lead partner in a successful proposal to deliver the new specialist diploma in engineering from 2008.

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

- A level success rates – The Colleges now offers only a minimum number of 'A' levels to part-time adult learners.

- The increase in the range of work placement opportunities for full-time students.

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

- None