

Stoke-on-Trent College

Inspection Report 4-8 June 2007

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. Stoke-on-Trent College is a large general further education college which serves the city of Stoke-on-Trent, much of north Staffordshire and parts of south Cheshire. The college operates from two main campuses in Burslem and Shelton, three neighbourhood colleges and satellite centres across the city. In partnership with the local sixth form college, the college provides and jointly manages a sixth form centre for learners aged 16-18 at its Burslem campus. The college has a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in care and joint CoVEs in construction and business and professional services. The college offers a wide range of provision in 13 of the 15 sector subject areas. The college mission is 'Excellence in education and skills for work and life'.
2. In 2005/2006, the college enrolled approximately 30,000 learners, of whom 13% were on full-time courses and about 80% were aged 19 or over. The proportion of college learners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds was 7.7%, compared with North Staffordshire's population of 2.7%. Approximately 1,000 learners aged 14-16 studied at the college. In 2005/06, the college had approximately 600 work-based learners. It works in partnership with JobCentre Plus and provides programme centres within the city. The college leads the largest Train to Gain consortium in the West Midlands.
3. In 2005, the proportion of learners achieving five GCSE A* to C grades in local schools was 46% which was 10.5% below the national average. Stoke-on-Trent is the 18th most deprived local authority area in England. Over a quarter of the city's population have basic skills needs in literacy and numeracy. The city's traditional industries, particularly ceramics and manufacturing, have declined.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: grade 2
Achievement and standards	Satisfactory: grade 3
Quality of provision	Good: grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: grade 2
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Good: contributory grade 2</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: grade 2

4. The college provides a good quality of education and training. Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Many success rates are close to national averages and those for adults on level 1 provision and for learners aged 16-18 on very short courses are high. Success rates have improved over three years and college data indicate continuing progress. Success and retention rates for learners aged 16-18 on levels 2 and 3 courses, however, are low and have been so for several years. Key skills success rates have improved. Work-based learning success rates are satisfactory, but improving. The standard of learners' work and their attendance are satisfactory.
5. Teaching and learning are good. The internal lesson observation system is comprehensive, but feedback on areas for improvement is not always sufficient. Many teachers use information learning technology (ILT) very well to aid learning. In the less effective lessons, the pace is too slow and learners lack challenge. Initial assessment of learners' literacy and numeracy needs is good. The quality of feedback on learners' work is inconsistent. Teachers track learners' progress well.
6. The approach to educational and social inclusion is good. The college's response to meeting the needs of learners is good. Links with external agencies are very effective and benefit learners and the local communities.
7. The provision of advice, guidance and support to learners is good. The tutorial system is effective. The range of support services is comprehensive and learners feel safe in college.
8. Leadership and management and strategic leadership are good. Work-based learning curriculum management is good. Managers use learners' feedback well, but that from employers is less well collected and analysed. Equality of opportunity is good. The self-assessment report is full and detailed, but does not cover areas for improvement sufficiently. Financial management is good. Since achievement and standards are satisfactory, so is value for money. Governance is outstanding.

Capacity to improve

Good: grade 2

9. The college demonstrates a good capacity to improve. Governors, managers and staff share a common vision to improve provision. The strategic plan sets a clear direction. Quality assurance systems are good.

The internal lesson observation system is robust and links well to staff appraisal and development. Managers take effective action in areas where improvement is needed. Managers use data well to monitor course performance.

10. The self-assessment report involves all staff, but is insufficiently self-critical. The development plan sets appropriate targets and timescales for identified improvements. Managers make good use of learners' feedback, but the systematic use of employers' feedback is less well developed.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

11. The college has taken good steps to improve the quality of its provision since the last inspection. It has embedded key skills and Skills for Life effectively in most programmes, and the use of online assessment has raised achievement. Managers have invested significantly in ILT and staff have created collaborative teaching resources to improve learning. Staff development in the use of ILT has been significant and effective. The college has built a very good construction technology centre as the first phase of its accommodation strategy. Managers have improved pass and retention rates on level 3 courses significantly since the last inspection, but retention and success rates for learners aged 16-18 on levels 2 and 3 courses are still well below national averages.

Key strengths

- good teaching and learning aided by the highly effective use of information learning technology
- highly effective strategic partnerships with schools, local college, employers and the community
- good strategic leadership
- good work-based learning curriculum management
- outstanding governance.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- low success and retention rates by learners aged 16-18 on levels 2 and 3 provision
- insufficient structured collection and analysis of employers' feedback.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Satisfactory: grade 3

12. Achievement and standards are satisfactory. This judgement disagrees with the college's self-assessment of good. Many success rates are close to national averages. The success rates for adult learners on level 1 courses and for learners aged 16-18 on very short courses are high and have been above national averages for four years. Success and retention rates for learners aged 16-18 on levels 2 and 3 courses are low and have been so for four years. Success rates on these courses are lower than the national averages of similar courses. Success rates have improved over three years at a greater rate than the improvement in national averages. College data suggest that retention rates at the time of the inspection are slightly higher than at the same time in 2005/06. The provision for learners aged 14-16 is effective and many progress onto college courses when they leave school.
13. Key skills success rates have improved in the last two years, except for the relatively few learners studying level 3 key skills, and at levels 1 and 2 are well above the low national averages. The framework completion success rates of learners on apprenticeship programmes have improved since the last inspection to national averages. College data suggest that this improvement continues in 2006/07. In 2005/06, the achievement of frameworks within the agreed timescale was slow. Success rates for learners on Train to Gain are satisfactory. Positive outcomes for learners in the programme centre are good. Learners improve their skills and gain confidence.
14. Although most learners on BTEC level 3 courses achieve better results than expected, compared with their prior attainment, many learners on NVQ courses do not reach their expected outcomes. A low proportion of learners on level 3 courses achieves high grades. The proportion of learners joining the college with five or more GCSE grades A* to C has declined over the last three years.
15. The success rates of learners receiving additional support are above those of learners not receiving support. Male learners aged 16-18 on level 2 courses are less successful than females. No group of learners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds consistently underachieves significantly, compared with learners from white backgrounds.

16. Learners' enjoyment of college is good. They feel safe in college. Although certain learners attain very high levels of skills and prestigious awards, the standard of learners' work is satisfactory. Attendance has improved to a satisfactory level. Punctuality is good.

Quality of provision

Good: grade 2

17. The quality of provision is good and this agrees with the college's self-assessment. Teaching and learning are good and this also concurs with the college's self-assessment. Inspectors agreed with most of the college's judgements in the joint observations. The internal lesson observation system is effective, but feedback does not always emphasise areas for improvement sufficiently. Observers identify and share good teaching practice effectively. Advanced skills teachers support teachers effectively.
18. The planning of teaching and learning is thorough and aims and objectives are clear and achievable. In the best lessons, the pace is brisk and activities challenge learners of all abilities. Learners work well together and with their teachers. Most learners enjoy their lessons. The use of ILT across the college is a particular strength; teachers used 'smart boards' very effectively to enliven learning. The embedding of key skills and Skills for Life into vocational learning activities is developing well and learners' achievements have improved. In the less effective lessons, the pace of learning is slow, activities are less challenging and learners do not work to their potential. The standard of teaching on work-based learning programmes is good.
19. The initial assessment process identifies learners' additional support needs effectively. The links with local schools to help the transition of learners with additional support needs are good. Specialist support staff work well alongside teachers to support groups of learners. Disabled learners have been proactive in securing improvements for learners with difficulties and/or disabilities. Managers monitor the effectiveness of additional learning support well.
20. The standard of learners' work is satisfactory. The marking of their work is thorough. However, the quality of feedback on learners' assessed work is inconsistent. In the best examples, comments are comprehensive and constructive. In the less effective cases, the feedback lacks detail and does not provide formative guidance to help learners produce better work. Some learners self-assess their work very well. Internal verification is thorough. The tracking of learners' progress is effective. Learners' targets are reviewed regularly. The college informs parents, carers and employers of learners' progress and makes frequent contact when learners are underperforming.

21. The response to meeting the needs and interests of learners is good. The range of courses is comprehensive and progression routes from entry level to advanced courses are available. Discrete provision for full-time learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 16-25 is underdeveloped. Labour market research informs curriculum provision effectively and the college meets many employers' needs through a wide range of work-based learning programmes. The college has effective CoVEs in construction, business and professional services and care. It leads the local Train to Gain consortium well. The links with partner schools are extensive and courses for learners aged 14-16 are successful. The college has good partnerships with local colleges and higher education institutions. Many learners make a good contribution to the life of the college and the local community.
22. The college's approach to educational and social inclusion is good. The proportion of learners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds is higher than in the local population. The variety of innovative projects to increase participation in areas of high deprivation is wide. The college responds actively to local needs and has established strong partnerships with the community, schools and employers. The range of curriculum enrichment opportunities, including an international exchange programme, is good. Work-based learners are not able to participate fully in enrichment. The students' union is very active.
23. Advice, guidance and support for learners are good. Links with partner schools, communities and employers to support learners' transition to college are good. Managers plan induction well. Staff use initial assessments well to formulate individual learning plans and monitor progress against agreed targets regularly. Progress reviews for work-based learners contain clear targets to help them focus on achieving their qualification. The timetabling of literacy and numeracy lessons impacts adversely on some vocational learners' experiences. The tutorial system is effective and links well to cross-college support services. Learning mentors work closely with learners at risk and with vulnerable learners. Retention rates for learners aged 16-18 on levels 2 and 3 programmes have improved but are still low compared with national averages.
24. The range of learners' support services is comprehensive and includes counselling, childcare, financial support, health related advice and careers information. The educational maintenance allowance (EMA) scheme has a positive impact on retention. The links with the Connexions service are close. The college promotes healthy lifestyles actively. The provision to enable learners to achieve economic wellbeing is good.

Leadership and management

Good: grade 2

Contributory grade:

Equality of opportunity

Good: grade 2

25. Leadership and management are good and this agrees with the college's self-assessment. The principal, governors and senior managers provide good strategic leadership. Changes in funding, the decline in local industries and relatively low school leavers' achievements set the challenging context within which the college works. Senior managers and governors have taken decisive actions to address poor performance. Middle managers develop their management skills effectively. Work-based learning curriculum management is good.
26. Staff have ready access to accurate data to inform programme planning and monitor course performance. In work-based learning, managers use data less effectively to monitor learners' progress and inform performance. Managers make good use of learners' feedback to inform developments. However, the systematic use of employers' feedback is less well developed. The self-assessment process incorporates the views of staff effectively, but does not always identify areas for improvement.
27. Equality of opportunity is good. The college has a strong equality and diversity steering group. Managers monitor the success rates of different groups and take appropriate actions to address imbalances. The college has made good progress in its response to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 (SENDA). College sites are fully accessible to people with restricted mobility. The arrangements to protect children and vulnerable adults are good. Managers maintain a comprehensive and current single central recruitment and vetting record.
28. Staff engage in a wide variety of professional development activities and are well qualified. Most college accommodation is adequately equipped and resourced. Most classrooms have good ILT systems. A new construction technology centre provides an excellent learning environment. Financial management is good. Managers have good access to information on the cost of programmes. In 2005/06, the college met only 94% of its enrolment targets. Achievement and standards are satisfactory and so value for money is satisfactory.

29. The college contributes significantly to the improvement of the local educational and economic environment through successful and extensive partnership working. In liaison with schools, employers and universities, the college plays a key role in the development and delivery of 14-19 provision, work-based learning, and higher education.

30. Governance of the college is outstanding. Governors bring a very good breadth of experience and skills to the college. Communication between governors and managers is excellent. Governors monitor college performance very thoroughly.

Learners' achievements

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003/04 to 2005/06, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
1 Long	03/04	1819	62	60	2	6320	64	59	5
	04/05	1692	65	64	1	3997	74	62	12
	05/06	1249	67	*	*	3607	71	*	*
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	91	64	65	-1	-	-	52	-
	04/05	46	80	68	12	-	-	58	-
	05/06	45	73	*	*	-	-	*	*
NVQs	03/04	84	60	61	-1	223	52	62	-10
	04/05	86	63	67	-4	380	76	67	9
	05/06	80	59	*	*	386	83	*	*
Other	03/04	1644	62	60	2	6097	65	59	6
	04/05	1560	65	64	1	3616	74	61	13
	05/06	1124	67	*	*	3192	70	*	*

* The 2005/06 national rates were not released at the time of this inspection

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003/04 to 2005/06, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
2 Long	03/04	1241	52	56	-4	3590	47	54	-7
	04/05	1609	51	61	-10	4636	64	60	4
	05/06	1705	56	*	*	4591	60	*	*
GCSEs	03/04	193	59	61	-2	391	64	59	5
	04/05	213	55	64	-9	377	62	62	0
	05/06	220	71	*	*	278	71	*	*
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	107	67	63	4	-	-	57	-
	04/05	123	59	67	-8	-	-	70	-
	05/06	61	77	*	*	-	-	*	*
NVQs	03/04	339	40	52	-12	1765	44	54	-10
	04/05	432	42	57	-15	1837	61	60	1
	05/06	454	53	*	*	1860	60	*	*
Other	03/04	602	54	54	0	1428	46	53	-7
	04/05	841	53	60	-7	2418	67	59	8
	05/06	970	53	*	*	2449	59	*	*

* The 2005/06 national rates were not released at the time of this inspection

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003/04 to 2005/06, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
3 Long	03/04	808	49	64	-15	2128	47	54	-7
	04/05	728	55	68	-13	1908	50	57	-7
	05/06	857	54	*	*	1915	57	*	*
A/A2 Levels	03/04	18	56	84	-28	47	72	66	6
	04/05	-	-	86	-	27	67	69	-2
	05/06	23	74	*	*	38	68	*	*
AS Levels	03/04	73	51	63	-12	132	47	50	-3
	04/05	96	55	66	-11	123	51	52	-1
	05/06	129	53	*	*	93	61	*	*
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	300	47	52	-5	61	49	44	5
	04/05	150	61	60	1	38	53	53	0
	05/06	127	48	*	*	15	33	*	*
NVQs	03/04	47	32	54	-22	558	46	47	-1
	04/05	34	50	62	-12	475	56	54	2
	05/06	19	47	*	*	516	60	*	*
Other	03/04	370	53	56	-3	1330	47	56	-9
	04/05	447	53	60	-7	1245	47	58	-11
	05/06	559	56	*	*	1253	56	*	*

* The 2005/06 national rates were not released at the time of this inspection

Table 4

Success rates on work-based learning programmes managed by the college in 2004/05 and 2005/06.

a) Overall success rate

End Year	Apprenticeship Programme	Number of Learners *	College Framework rate **	National rate **	College NVQ rate **	National rate **
2004/05	Apprenticeship	203	48	38	56	50
	Advanced	102	23	34	44	48
2005/06	Apprenticeship	237	54	53	56	58
	Advanced	81	43	44	46	54

* Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned

** College and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'

b) Timely success rate

End Year	Apprenticeship Programme	Number of Learners *	College Framework rate **	National rate **	College NVQ rate **	National rate **
2004/05	Apprenticeship	196	22	22	28	29
	Advanced	107	13	21	30	31
2005/06	Apprenticeship	261	29	33	32	38
	Advanced	95	21	27	22	34

* The number of learners who planned to complete their learning programme in the given year

** College and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'