

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Stoke-on-Trent College

Date of visit: 6 May 2008

Context

Stoke-on-Trent College is a large general further education (GFE) 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, 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 16-18 year olds at its Burslem campus. The college has a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in care and joint CoVEs in construction and in business and professional services.

In 2006/07, the college enrolled approximately 30,000 students, of whom 11.9% were on full-time courses. Around 80% were aged 19 or over. In 2006/07 the college had around 1,000 work-based learners. Around 1,000 pre-16 learners are enrolled at the College.

The mission of the College is 'Excellence in education and skills for work and life'.

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in improving overall success rates?	Insufficient progress
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The success rate on long qualifications for learners of all ages rose by 1% in 2006/07, but the overall success rate including all short qualifications fell by 2%. The success rate for learners aged 19 and over on long courses stayed the same at 63% around the previous year's national average. For learners aged 16-18 the success rate rose by 4% but remains below the previous national average. This improvement has arisen because of improvement in retention rates, a key target area for action. Amongst adults there has been some improvement in achievement, although this has been offset by a decline in retention. This decline has not been identified by the college.

At level 2 the success rate on NVQ programmes is well below national averages for all ages and significant numbers of learners do not achieve within the expected timeframe.

Are success rate trends in work based learning improving?	Insufficient progress
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At the inspection of June 2007 achievement and standards for apprenticeship and

Train to Gain learners were satisfactory and around national averages. Achievements within the agreed timescale were low. Overall success rates for the apprenticeship programme between 2004/05 and 2006/07 declined.

Advanced apprenticeship framework and NVQ success rates have improved to national averages but the number of learners completing their qualification within the agreed time is still below national average. The apprenticeship success rate for framework completion, which was above the national average in 2004/05, dropped below the national average in 2006/07. The numbers of learners achieving an NVQ only qualification over the same period also declined.

The college recognises it needs to make significant improvements in this area. A number of strategies have been put in place to address the issues but although there are some positive trends in a few sector areas it is too early to assess their impact. The Train to Gain consortium is managed well and success rates are satisfactory.

Quality of provision

What changes has the college made in the curriculum offer to impact on access and success of different groups?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection discrete provision for full time learners with learning difficulties and disabilities aged 16-25 was judged to be underdeveloped. In September 2007 the college started a full-time life skills programme and this programme is planned to increase in the coming year. New building plans incorporate a dedicated area for discrete provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities.

The college development plan highlights changes in curriculum structure designed to improve success rates. The college has identified several instances where two year courses have been redesigned as two separate one year courses, and where accredited introductory programmes have been built into the start of long courses, enabling learner success to be celebrated early in the course. These developments were implemented rapidly for the start of 2007/08. They appear to be having a positive impact on learner retention but it is too early to see any impact on achievement.

All sector areas have revisited and revised their recruitment and selection procedures to ensure learners are placed on appropriate programmes. Programme managers for work based learning are ensuring better liaison with employers to match learners with placements.

What changes has the college made in teaching and learning and learner support to improve success rates?	Reasonable progress
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The college development plan highlights improvements in teaching and learning to increase the proportion of good and outstanding lessons. Programme managers describe a number of aspects of teaching and learning that have improved.

Peer observations and paired observations are used regularly. Staff comment that observations of teaching and learning are now more rigorous, producing action plans that feed promptly into continuing professional development. Clear strengths and areas for improvement are identified, feedback is constructive and good practice is shared through the use of advanced practitioners and subject coaches, who are fully trained and accredited. In addition a teaching and learning toolkit is being introduced across the college. The college's virtual learning environment is being used to share good practice and improve the consistency of lesson planning.

The college has implemented a further range of support measures to improve success rates since the previous inspection. The newly appointed recruitment, support and progression managers within each faculty are ensuring support is more appropriately targeted. There has been significant investment in in-class support by learning support workers especially for learners on level 2 programmes. The college recognizes the importance of learners progressing, especially at aged 17, and this is being addressed in line with local LSC priorities.

Attendance and in-year retention have improved in 2007/8 and are expected to help improve end of year success rates.

What progress has the college made in improving the collection and analysis of employer feedback?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection the collection and analysis of employer data was identified as weakness. A database to capture employer survey results is now in place and reports are benchmarked against other providers. The result of consultation with 57 employers has recently been published and identifies strong employer confidence in the services which the college provides. The data has yet to be disaggregated to provide a more detailed look at performance in sector areas and to inform self-assessment. However, the college makes good use of informal feedback through forums, network meetings and tutor assessor visits to respond to employers concerns. For example information is used to give better advice and guidance to young people and employer news issues are provided by the college training and consultancy services.

To what extent has the college improved the use of learner progress information within work based learning?	Reasonable progress
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The previous inspection report stated that management of work based learning was good but that managers use data less effectively to monitor learner progress and inform performance. A traffic light system has been introduced to monitor and track learner progress. Bespoke staff training and development is being provided to support the embedding of the system; a second phase of training and implementation has started across sector areas. The work based learning manager is also developing a system of strategic reporting which aligns with new measures of success to provide staff with a more effective means of identifying and forecasting trends in performance.

How has the college developed its quality system to bring about further improvements in quality and success rates?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection the internal lesson observation system was judged to be comprehensive although feedback on areas for improvement was not always sufficient. This issue has been addressed through the redesign of the observation feedback instruments. In addition extensive and targeted staff development is offered following observations.

The self- assessment process has been improved since the previous inspection. There has been extensive training of middle managers. The quality and accessibility of management information on the portal has been improved and further improvements are planned before the start of the next academic year.

Course team leaders were more heavily involved in course review at the end of 2006/07 and were provided with good data on which to make judgements. Although each programme area agrees and monitors an action plan this is not published alongside the self- assessment, thus making evaluation difficult.

However, there is insufficient evaluation of top level data by senior managers to identify trends and cross college priorities.

To what extent is the college responsive to national, regional and local priorities?	Significant progress
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The college is making significant progress in developing strategic networks in response to national, regional and local agendas. It has a particularly strong employer engagement strategy. Managers have formed some positive links with strategic partnerships and employers both nationally and regionally. This is facilitated by a strong cross college team, The Employer Services Forum, which is effective in sharing labour market information, employer feedback and updates on new curriculum and training developments. The college is well placed through the successful establishment of its partnerships to respond to the emerging national skills agenda. The college has been awarded a substantial direct Department for Work and Pensions contract to tackle barriers to employment and work with employers.

The college works with key external partners to help address the NEETS agenda, including Connexions for whom it will be a lead partner in the delivery of a substantial ESF funded NEETS programme. The college has a comprehensive cross-college NEETS action plan which has been endorsed by its governors.