

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Stoke on Trent College

Date of visit: 2 June 2009

Context

Stoke on Trent College (the college) is a large general further education college serving the city of Stoke, 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 16–18 year olds at its Burslem campus. In November 2008, the college was approved for the Training Quality Standard with excellence in construction skills, building services and logistics. The college has joint centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs) in care and in business and professional services.

The college offers a broad range of provision in 13 of the 15 sector subject areas. In 2007/08, the college enrolled 25,284 students on learning and skills council funded courses, of whom 20% were on full-time courses and some 74% were aged 19 or over. Approximately 700 pre-16 year olds are studying one day per week at the college. In 2007/08 the college had 713 work-based learners. The college has significant numbers of adults undertaking work-based learning and current numbers engaged in this provision are in excess of 5,000, including a substantial Train to Gain contract. The college works in partnership with JobCentre Plus and provides programme centres within the county.

In 2007, the proportion of learners achieving 5 GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics in local schools was 35%, which is 11.7 percentage points below the national average. Stoke on Trent is the 16th most deprived local authority area in England. Over 28% of the city's population have a basic skills need in literacy, and 31% have a basic skills need in numeracy. The city's traditional industries, particularly ceramics and manufacturing, have declined.

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in improving overall success rates, especially at level 2 and level 3?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in improving overall success rates in the last year. The long course success rate for learners of all ages has risen faster than the national rate of increase between 2006/07 and 2007/08 but remains below the national average. The rate of improvement has been faster on level 1 and level 3 courses than on level 2 courses. The long course success rate for learners aged 16–

18 on level 2 and 3 courses remains well below national average; for adults it remains below national average.

The college is developing a cross college framework to set and monitor learners' progress against targets based on prior attainment but currently does not have an overview of learners' progress. This will be implemented through the individual learning plan which is currently being piloted.

The college is at an early stage in analysing the relative success rates of minority ethnic learners. Differences between the outcomes of groups have recently been identified but have not yet been tackled.

What progress has been made in improving work-based learning and national vocational qualification (NVQ) success rates in the past year?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in improving work-based learning and NVQ success rates in the last year. Between 2006/07 and 2007/08, advanced apprenticeship framework and NVQ success rates increased slightly to be at or about the national averages. Timely completion success rates, however, increased significantly in the same period to be at or about the national averages.

Between 2006/07 and 2007/08, the apprenticeship framework and NVQ success rates increased significantly to be at or about the national averages, as did timely completion rates in each case. The numbers of apprentices and advanced apprentices have increased over this period.

In-year performance data for 2008/09 indicate that the framework completion success rate is just below the national rate, whereas the timely completion success rate is just above the national rate. The progress made by work-based learners in 2006/07 was satisfactory compared with their prior attainment; apprentices made better progress than advanced apprentices. NVQ learners made less progress than expected compared with their prior attainment.

What progress has the college made in improving learners' key skills?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in improving learners' key skills success rates. Overall key skills success rates have increased over the last three years with significant improvement between 2006/07 and 2007/08, although the numbers of learners involved have declined considerably. Each of the main key skills success rates is similar.

Senior managers have supported the development of key skills, especially because of the relatively low numbers of learners starting courses at the college with high grades in GCSE English and mathematics. The provision is managed strategically and centrally in the Skills for Life faculty and operationally through Skills for Life coordinators in each faculty. These coordinators act as agents for advice and change.

Managers have raised the importance of key skills successfully and have enabled vocational staff to improve the delivery of key skills in their courses.

Quality of provision

How effective are learner support strategies in improving success rates?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in developing a range of learner support strategies to raise success rates. Although the college has not evaluated the impact of individual initiatives there has been improvement in success rates on long courses at each level. Support strategies have been especially successful at improving achievement. Learning support assistants give extensive in-class support; each faculty employs a recruitment, support, progression manager who works to ensure students are on the right course and receive the support they need in a timely manner; each faculty employs a mentor to target support as required; more extensive data are available on each learner and staff have better access to them. A newly devised 'Progression Strategy' aims to bring related initiatives together into a more coherent package across the whole college. The strategy covers curriculum pathways, entry requirements, targets and feedback to learners, the 'ready to work' initiative and learner involvement in progression strategies.

How has the college addressed issues of challenge and pace within lessons?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in addressing the issue of challenge and pace within lessons. The newly revised lesson observation process highlights the need for greater challenge and appropriate pace. Staff who need additional guidance and support are identified through the system and directed to related continuing professional development activities. Observers have been extensively trained in the significance of challenge and pace on learners' progress. It is too early to judge the impact of this initiative.

Leadership and management

What progress has the college made in improving the collection and analysis of employer feedback?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in improving the collection and analysis of employers' feedback. It has considerable feedback on employers' views from surveys by external agencies. Because of this, it decided not to conduct its own employers' survey. Much of the feedback is positive. Programme area self-assessments and key action points refer well to links with employers, but make little reference to employers' views. Although the college produced an overview of employer liaison for the training quality standard submission, the college does not evaluate its overall responsiveness to employers in the self-assessment report.

Examples of impact of the analysis of employers' views includes changing provision to meet employers' and employees' needs, advising employers where alternative provision can be found, devising new programmes to supply unmet needs and increased bespoke or specialised training. Most of the employer provision is through faculty delivery teams.

To what extent are quality assurance arrangements driving forward improvements in success rates?	Reasonable progress
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The college has made reasonable progress in driving forward improvements in success rates through quality assurance arrangements. The college is currently refining the self-assessment process as a result of peer review. Staff and managers have better access to learner and performance data. The closer involvement of course team leaders working with programme managers has further improved the self-assessment process. Course team leaders are empowered to work with their teams to evaluate the key matters on their course. This informs the action plan more appropriately. The impact of this has been to change many level 3 courses from national diplomas to awards, certificates and diplomas spread over two separate years. Consequently, retention and success rates have improved in some areas. Managers and staff are aware of the need to raise success rates further and at a faster rate. Managers take the views of learners increasingly into account. They have also changed management structures in some areas, as well as curriculum and assessment processes. Subject learning coaches have improved course management.

The teaching enhancement programme is well established. Its scope has been extended this year to cover a wider range of learning activities, including the role of learning support within lessons. The college has revised its lesson observation process and adopted a more central approach to observations. Strategic issues and good practice are now more easily identified and shared. In addition in-depth internal reviews have been conducted this year in a number of curriculum areas. These have identified areas where curriculum self-assessments have not reflected success rates sufficiently. The newly devised Professional Development Centre is coordinating activity from the lesson observation process and internal reviews to increase consistency and coherence and ensure support and training is more closely targeted. It is too early to judge the impact of changes to the teaching enhancement programme.