

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: St Helens College

Date of visit: 9 June 2009

Context

St Helens College is located in the south east of Merseyside. The college has three campuses; one in the centre of St Helens, a technology centre two miles away and a centre in the town of Newton-le-Willows. It provides courses at several other centres throughout the borough.

The total number of enrolments on roll in 2007/08 was 8,490, of which 2,792 were learners aged 16 to 18 and 5,698 were adults. The number of full-time learners was 2,899. The number of learners following work-based learning programmes was 512 with 240 adults on Train to Gain programmes. The college provides courses in 14 sector subject areas and, in several, learners can progress from entry level to degree level. The college's mission statement 'It's all about you' is supported by five core college values to meet the needs of learners.

The most recent inspection of St Helens College was published in December 2006. The college was graded good for overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, quality of provision and leadership and management. Achievement and standards were satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in improving the success rates on long courses and short courses?	Reasonable progress
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In 2007/08 the college's overall long course success rate is broadly at the national average having increased in line with the national rate of improvement. The success rate for students aged 16 to 18 increased significantly from below to above the national rate. However, for adult learners the long course success rate fell by two percentage points to below the national average. The decline was mostly due to a fall in achievement on level 1 courses and retention on level 2 courses. Strategies have been implemented to address these issues and in-year college data shows improvements. At level 3 adult success rates are broadly in line with national averages. In 2007/08 short course success rates improved and remain high.

College data for 2008/09 indicates a significant improvement to in-year retention. Improvements between 2007/08 and 2008/09 show that overall retention increased from 80% to 89%; for learners aged 16 to 18 from 83% to 86%; and for adult learners from 77% to 91%.

Quality of provision

What improvements have been made to improving the quality of provision in preparation for life and work and the success rates on these courses?	Reasonable progress
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The college has focused on several areas of development to improve the quality of the preparation for life and work provision. The provision is being developed to better meet the needs of a diverse learner group. Increased links with local feeder schools are now in place to more accurately identify learners' needs and skills, and support the transition process. Potential learners choose from a range of tasters across the college with the aim of enabling them to make informed choices about provision. Stronger links have been established with the Connexions service to support the college's developments. The range of provision within this area has been extended. Additional employability courses are now in place for learners not yet ready for the Entry to Employment (E2E) programme. A more flexible two-weekly registration and induction process is in place for E2E learners. The role of key support workers in E2E has been enhanced. Learners identify clearly the benefits of the support and guidance provided by their key workers.

The provision in supported learning, for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, now includes a range of programmes at different levels. Since September 2008, the college has introduced provision for learners with profound and complex needs. The healthcare team provides support to these learners.

In 2007/08 success rates of students aged 16 to 18 in the preparation for life and work programme area improved from 59% to 77%. However, for adults in this programme area the success rate fell slightly to 70% which is in-line with the national average. On E2E courses the progression rate for 2007/08 was 64%, which is above the national rate. In 2007/08 the success rates for Skills for Life programmes overall was 67%, which is below the national rate. However, for learners aged 16 to 18, the success rate at 78% was high with a decline in the adult success rate to 63%. Strategies introduced from September 2008 have significantly improved adult retention rates.

What progress has been made in improving key skills delivery and success rates?	Reasonable progress
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Key skills success rates have continued to improve and at all levels except level 1 for students aged 16 to 18, although the actual success rate on level 1 courses is above the 2007 national average. At levels 1 and 3 the college's success rates are above national averages and whilst there are improvements at level 2 the success rate is low and below the 2007 national rate.

The college continues to develop its provision for key skills. Managers emphasise that data is more accurate and are now presented at programme level which helps them to identify areas of under performance and to monitor success rates more closely. Data highlight learners who achieve the portfolio but still need to complete the end test. Targeted support is being provided for these learners to improve achievements in the tests. There have been changes in the college's key skills policy. Learners are now registered for one key skill at a time and this has led to improvements. Better links with feeder schools provide more accurate information on learners' prior achievements to ensure they are enrolled on the right level of key skill. The key skills manager meets monthly with staff in the college. Key skills awareness raising sessions have been delivered at staff training days and resources to support delivery have improved. Further developments have been implemented in 2008/09.

What progress has been made in further improving employer engagement (work based learning & train to gain provision) and the success rates on these courses?	Significant Progress
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The college has increased significantly the number and range of employer engagement activities. There is a clear strategic focus on engaging with large local employers, as well as public sector employers and small and medium enterprises across Merseyside. The college was successful in a bid to provide the training at Liverpool airport where there is a local skills shortage in an area of high deprivation. A clear strategic direction is in place for the development of work-based learning. A work-based learning development manager has been in place since April 2008 with a remit to expand and develop work-based learning programmes. A structure of monthly meetings enables senior managers to monitor and focus on improving overall success rates. Through this process, the college has identified areas for concern and taken appropriate actions. Some poorly performing work-based learning programmes have been removed.

The overall framework success rate has improved consistently since 2005/06 when it was below the national rate. The overall success rate for 2007/08 at 64% is now equal to the national rate. Overall the Train to Gain success rate for 2007/08 at 81% is above the national rate.

What actions have been taken to follow up on the outcomes from lesson observations and what is the impact of the accelerated quality improvement projects in improving the quality of teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress
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The process of observing lessons and monitoring the quality of learning and teaching has been refined further since the last visit. The documentation has been improved to provide closer links between the outcomes from observations and the new

appraisal and performance monitoring system introduced in September 2008. The observation records reviewed at the visit do not always contain completed action points. The college plans to use the revised electronic documentation, audit process and links to appraisal to improve this. The outcomes from lesson observations clearly inform staff development and training. The college places a strong emphasis on raising the standards of lessons across the college. There are a wide range of development opportunities, from whole college days to bite size breakfast and tea-time sessions. The take-up of staff development has improved.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in further improving self-assessment and quality assurance systems and their impact?	Reasonable Progress
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The college's system has been refined further and there is a clear structure for the self-assessment report. Self-assessment includes staff at all levels in the college, curriculum and service areas. Areas for development are identified and strategies implemented but the improvement, whilst on an upward trend, has not been consistent within curriculum areas. Retention at whole college level improved in 2007/08 and is slightly above the 2007 national average. Further changes to the entry criteria, enrolment systems and induction programmes were implemented in September 2008 to further improve retention. In 2008/09 the in-year overall retention rate improved from 80% to 89%.

Learners' and staff's views are collated and used to inform judgements and make improvements in the college. The college has established four strategy and culture groups for each key area of the college's work: adults; 14 to19; Higher Education (HE); and business. The groups have a clear remit on improving retention and focus on improving learners' experience and performance. They meet monthly and feed their analysis and impact of actions to senior managers. In addition, a group of data champions, one per sector subject area, has been established to monitor learners' performance. These have been effective in identifying quickly the courses where there is an area for improvement and also aspects where there are strengths so that good practice can be shared swiftly. Quality acceleration projects have been effective in supporting curriculum areas and improving performance.