

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Stafford College

Date of visit: 13 March 2008

Context

Stafford College is a large general Further Education College based in the town of Stafford. The College has one main site and one smaller site both in the town centre and it operates two high street IT Centres. The College serves the town and a large part of mid and south Staffordshire. The College's mission is to 'meet learner needs and aspirations through excellence in education and training'.

The College offers vocational and general education programmes ranging from foundation level to higher education in 14 out of 15 sector subject areas funded by LSC. In 2006/07 there were around 2500 16-18 year old learners, mainly on full-time courses and around 4500 adult learners, mainly on part-time courses, plus around 300 work-based learners. The college delivers an extensive range of leisure and adult education programmes on behalf of the local education authority (LEA). The college is a member of 3 Train to Gain consortia. It delivers vocational qualifications to around 450 school pupils through the Increased Flexibility Programme. There are 6 high schools in Stafford all with sixth forms. In addition, the Chetwynd Centre, a school consortium post 16 centre funded by Staffordshire LEA, operates close to the College main site. The College is a member of the Stafford Borough 14-19 Collegiate. The College has a CoVE in Early Years Care and Education.

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in improving overall success rates?	Reasonable progress
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In 2006/07 the success rate on long courses rose by 4% to around the national average. Both retention and achievement rates have improved. The success rates on long courses at all levels and for all ages is satisfactory overall and is good at level 1 where retention has improved significantly. The college has taken action to address a decline in retention of 16 to 18 year old

learners on level 2 courses although in part this is due to a changing mix of courses. Numbers enrolling on short courses have fallen significantly and the success rate has stayed above the national average.

Previous variations in success rates between curriculum areas have largely been addressed: most have improved in 2006/07. There is no significant variation in success rates between male and female learners. A small proportion of learners are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The college has identified some variation in achievement between groups and built effective liaison with black and minority ethnic learners into the role of the new Equality and Diversity Co-ordinator.

What progress has the college made in improving success rates in construction?	Reasonable progress
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Success rates of 16-18 year old learners in construction rose significantly in 2006/07 to around the national average. The success rate of adult learners increased but remains below the national average. In work-based learning both overall and timely success rates for advanced apprentices are above average, however for apprentices they are below average rates.

To bring about this improvement the college has reviewed and streamlined its curriculum, addressed some staffing and leadership issues, provided staff training, especially on teaching and learning and improved resources and course organisation including the organisation of assessment. Under-achieving courses have been closely monitored in 2006/07. The college has identified a number of courses where progress has been slow and continues to monitor these in 2007/08. Current data shows an improvement in learner attendance and retention on these programmes.

What progress has the college made in improving success rates in key skills consistently?	Reasonable progress
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The success rate of key skills rose by 5% in 2006/7 to above the low national average. At level 1 the success rate is well above the national average on all 3 key skills; at level 2 the success rate of key skills delivered over 2 years is poor reducing the overall success rate to around the national average. The success rate on key skills delivered in 1 year is good and retention is exceptionally high. The college is moving towards a model of delivering all

key skills in one year. Work-based learners complete key skills early in their programme.

The college has moved to a model of integrated delivery of key skills in order to improve learner retention and achievement. The planning for integration is supported by a faculty key skill co-ordinator and monitored through the lesson observation programme. However progress over time has not yet been analysed.

What progress has been made in improving work-based learning success rates since the last inspection visit?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress in improving the success rates for work-based learning. At the last inspection performance was well below the national average. Improvement increases from 2004/05 to 2006/07 are significant and from a very low base. Recent data shows a continuing improving trend for 2006/07. Framework and NVQ success rates for advanced apprentices are just below national average and timely success rates just above. Framework and NVQ success rates for apprentices overall and timely are above national average.

However, there are some small areas of underperformance in sector subject areas which the college is addressing. Numbers of learners are small in some sector subject areas.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in improving its curriculum offer for foundation level students?	Reasonable progress
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The college initiated a new level 1 foundation programme in September 2007 to meet increasing learner demand. The programme has been well planned and implemented as a cross college programme and is regularly discussed and monitored at faculty meetings. The programme includes core units of personal effectiveness, literacy and numeracy and vocational pathway options in hospitality, performing arts, travel and tourism and care. The College plans to extend the pathway offer in September 2008 to include 3 more vocational routes. A high level of support is offered to learners who are often at risk of under achieving. Retention rates are high. The programme has yet to be fully

evaluated but it is anticipated that 70% will progress further onto College programmes.

What progress has the college made in ensuring a consistently high standard of tutorials?	Reasonable progress
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At the last inspection, tutorials were judged to be of variable quality and insufficiently monitored. Learners were not given sufficiently clear advice about the nature of bullying and harassment or about their rights and responsibilities to others.

The college took prompt action and tutorial procedures for full-time learners were reviewed and developed for 2006/07. A new programme of group tutorials addressing the themes of Every Child Matters (ECM) was introduced and an ECM co-ordinator was appointed to develop the new system and supporting resources. Staff training took place in summer 2006. A key feature is the use of external guest speakers for issues such as drug abuse, sexually transmitted disease (STD), alcohol abuse and road safety. This has been well received by both staff and learners. Links with the Primary Care Trust have been particularly successful in engaging learners in STD screening procedures.

The college has clear procedures for monitoring the tutorial programme although insufficient attention is given to collecting the learner perspective of the quality of the new tutorial programme. A number of quality audit checks are in place to monitor consistency and regularity of the tutorial including internal audits and direct observations. However during the monitoring visit learners report too much variation in the quality of external guest speakers and the lack of a tutorial schedule indicating content. They enjoy the discussion precipitated by tutors and external speakers and can raise items for the agenda and express personal opinions and concerns.

Equality and diversity is now covered at induction through the tutorial and learners are guided to where they can find the policies. This has yet to be evaluated. Tutorials provide good links to the drop-in centres which support learners at risk of falling behind.

Leadership and management

Has the management of work based learning improved?	Reasonable progress
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The self assessment report judges leadership and management of work-based learning as satisfactory. The appointment of a new curriculum manager has been extremely effective in both promoting the profile of work-based learning and managing the recent radical changes and developments. The curriculum manager has supported assessors and tutors to better understand specific procedures and use of data. Poorer performing areas have received closer monitoring and improved support.

The delivery and assessment of the programmes is now generally covered by the individual curriculum teams within the faculties supported by the work-based learning co-coordinator. The majority of programmes are integrated into the college systems and processes; including interviews, initial assessment, additional support, teaching and learning, reviews, and quality processes such as verification. A full programme of appropriate staff development is in place for A1 and V1 Awards and teaching qualifications.

The work-based learning team is addressing the need to attract a wider section of the community and build on its existing industry links.

How has the college developed its quality processes to bring about further improvements in success rates?	Reasonable progress
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As identified at the last inspection quality assurance arrangements are well established and generally effective in bringing about improvement. Success rates are rising across the college and many areas of underperformance have now been eliminated. A central feature of quality improvement is the identification and monitoring of courses at risk of low success rates, including courses with good but falling success rates. Action plans are agreed within the curriculum area and monitored by senior managers. Support is provided through a range of initiatives including joint work with the quality improvement facilitator who takes the role of critical friend and is playing a part in the emerging sharing of good practice.

The thorough quality plan is based on priorities identified through the quality system. It is approved and monitored by governors and adjusted annually

according to need. The plan includes observation and auditing arrangements which are increasingly thematic to assess the success of quality priorities. A new development in pilot phase within each faculty is peer coaching. This enables teams to agree a target development and receive support.