MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: St Helens College

Date of visit: 29 April 2008

Context

St Helens College is a general further education college serving the borough of St Helens, which lies to the south east of Merseyside and has an approximate population of 175,000. Although some areas of the borough are comparatively affluent, others have high levels of social and economic deprivation. The college has three campuses: one in the town centre; a technology campus about two miles away and another five miles away in the town of Newton-le-Willows. The College employs 725 staff, of whom 331 are academic staff and 394 are business support.

The total number of enrolments on Learning and Skills Council funded programmes on roll in 2006/07 was 10,951, of which 3,565 were 16-18 year olds and 7,386 were adults. Of these 3,625 learners were full-time. The number of learners following work-based learning programmes was 381. Of these 284 were 16-18 year olds and 97 learners were adults. The overall gender profile showed 57% of learners were female and 2% were from minority ethnic backgrounds compared with a local population of 1.2%. The college provides courses in 14 sector subject areas. The college also offers courses at a number of other centres within the borough. In several of the college's areas it is possible to progress from entry level to degree level.

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

Achievement and standards

Have retention, achievement and success rates improved across the college and curriculum areas?	Reasonable progress

The college has introduced a number of actions to improve retention and success rates. The college now clearly focuses on retaining learners and providing appropriate support to meet their needs as they complete one year courses, experience success and progress on to other courses. Year-on-year improvements are being made on long courses and in work-based learning. Success rates for 16-18 year olds and 19+ on long courses have improved since the previous inspection, from 66% in 2005/06 to 70% in 2006/07. However, success rates for both age groups on short courses have declined since the previous year, from 85% to 78%. Success rates for some sector subject areas have improved in 2006/07, for example, construction, planning and the built environment, and arts, media and publishing, but for others such as preparation for life and work, and social sciences, success rates have declined.

Retention across both age groups for long and short courses has improved. From 2005/06 to 2006/07, retention for learners aged 16-18 on long courses increased from 76% to 80%, and for 19+ learners it increased from 74% to 81%. The college has a clear focus on retention and most of the learners who stay do succeed. Learning mentors and learner performance officers have had a positive affect on retention. However, achievement on short courses has generally declined.

Key skills success rates for levels 1, 2 and 3 have remained broadly similar to those of 2005/06, although the number of learners undertaking key skills qualifications is significantly lower.

Quality of provision

What progress has the college made in further improving teaching and learning?	Significant progress

The college has further improved the lesson observation scheme. Teams drawing on observers from across the college carry out focused one week observations of sector subject areas. Cross-college moderation samples the observations to ensure consistency of judgement. In a minority of grade 1

observations moderation has identified some over-grading or insufficient evidence base to fully support the grade. The process has been further strengthened by some use of observers from a Peer Review Group, consisting of four North West colleges, providing added external objectivity to the observations. Observations lead to targeted staff development to further improve aspects of teaching and learning such as differentiation. No inadequate lessons have been observed in 2007/08 to date with 80% graded good or better. The proportion of satisfactory lessons has declined year on year over the last three years.

Information learning technology and information and communication technology (ICT) has been the subject of one of the accelerated quality improvement projects during the year. Staff access to laptops and other equipment and the use of information learning technology and ICT has continued to improve. Staff capacity to use information learning technology in teaching has been further increased. An information learning technology survey identified staff development needs and targeted staff development has been delivered both through timetabled and drop-in sessions. Staff are also able to identify further developments needs as they arise. The use of the virtual learning environment has further increased with over 790 courses created since its launch. Students are appreciative of the opportunities provided by the remote access available to the virtual learning environment. Online assessment is now used in many sector subject areas. The virtual learning environment is increasingly being used to provide differentiated learning opportunities.

What actions are in place to improve the experience for work based learners?	Reasonable progress

The college has improved the central support for its work-based learning through the recent appointment of a work-based learning development manager. Monitoring of the performance of work-based learning programmes and progress of individual apprentices has been strengthened with monthly reporting to senior managers. Achievement data for group performance are more readily available to appropriate staff through the college intranet. Training has been delivered to further develop staff understanding of the different measures of success on apprenticeship programmes. Recruitment and information, advice and guidance have been further developed to ensure appropriate recruitment to apprenticeship programmes. Both overall and timely success rates for advanced apprentices show significant improvement.

Overall success rates have improved year on year from 38% in 2004/05 to an in-year figure of 67% in 2007/08. In the same period timely success rates improved year on year from 29% in 2004/05, to 68% in-year for 2007/08. Improvements in apprenticeship success rates have not been as significant, or shown a trend of year on year improvement. However, overall success rates have improved from 51% in 2004/05 to an in-year figure of 59% in 2006/07. Timely success rates have remained at around 60% during the same period. Some underperforming programmes have been removed from the college portfolio where suitable alternative provision is available within the college or locally. College data indicates that the two programmes below the minimum levels of performance in 2006/07 are showing improved performance to significantly above minimum levels of performance in 2007/08.

How is the college improving opportunities for adults, particularly at foundation level?	Reasonable progress

Provision for adults within the college and community had been reduced previously. The college is now trying to re-energise provision by providing a range of enticements. Adult taster courses across the different sector subject areas are offered, with a view to encouraging learners on to level 2 programmes. Work is ongoing with employers to attract employed adults into education, for example, through Train to Gain courses. Actions have been taken to encourage out of work adults back into employment. A 'community ambassador' is to be appointed to further promote and develop learning in the community, and on other college programmes.

Leadership and management

What are the key initiatives introduced to improve the quality of provision?	Reasonable progress

The college has introduced or is further embedding a number of initiatives to improve the quality of provision. Quality is clearly better understood by staff as a key driver for improvements. An electronic self-assessment tool is helping staff to take ownership of and contribute effectively to a far more evaluative approach to self-assessment. The self-assessment process now takes place at sector subject area, programme and college level to produce and use data to evidence judgements. Closer monitoring of learner progress is carried out by staff who are more confident to use the data in an informed

way. Quality acceleration projects have resolved areas for improvement more quickly and appropriately. Feedback from learners is sought earlier used well to drive improvements. Peer reviewing exercises take place with other colleges to improve teaching and learning. Learners are now placed on the right course at the right level, and most learners are on one year programmes which ensure early successes and promote progression.