

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

St Helens College

June 1994

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a statutory duty to ensure that there are satisfactory arrangements to assess the quality of provision in the further education sector. It discharges the duty in part through its inspectorate, which inspects and reports on each college in the sector every four years. The Council's inspectorate also assesses and reports on a national basis on specific curriculum areas and advises the Council's quality assessment committee.

College inspections involve both full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have specialist knowledge and experience in the areas they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member from outside the world of education and a nominated member of staff from the college being inspected.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are described in the Council Circular 93/28. In the course of inspecting colleges, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also summarise their judgements on the balance between strengths and weaknesses using a five-point scale. The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses*
- grade 2 – provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- grade 3 – provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses*
- grade 4 – provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- grade 5 – provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.*

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FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 53/94

ST HELENS COLLEGE, MERSEYSIDE

NORTH WEST REGION

Inspected January-March 1994

Summary

St Helens College on Merseyside is a large college of general further education. It operates in a highly competitive educational environment, in an area of significant long-term unemployment and relatively low aspirations. It is committed to playing a full part in the economic regeneration of the region. It is highly responsive to its community and offers an extensive range of vocational courses which provide opportunities for students to progress to other courses including those in higher education. Most students are adults who attend the college on a part-time basis. There is successful recruitment of students who are traditionally under-represented in this sector, through a range of adult basic education courses, access to further education opportunities, and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There are good links with employers and effective partnerships with the local TEC and the local authority. Management and governance are strong. Students benefit from the effective and sometimes innovative teaching of committed and well-qualified staff. Mature students are especially enthusiastic and confident. Some accommodation, for example the purpose-built technology campus, is excellent. Levels of equipment are generally high. Achievements in external examinations and assessments range from excellent to poor. In some courses, large numbers of students do not complete their studies. Standards at GCE A level are poor. The recording of results and tracking of students' progress are underdeveloped.

The grades awarded as a result of the inspection are given below.

Aspects of cross-college provision		Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision		1
Governance and management		1
Students' recruitment, guidance and support		2
Quality assurance		2
Resources:	staffing	2
	equipment/learning resources	2
	accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Sciences	3	Care, leisure, catering	1
Construction	2	Art and design	2
Engineering and technology	1	Humanities and education	3
Business and administration	1		

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INTRODUCTION

1 The inspection of FEFC-funded work at St.Helens College on Merseyside took place in three stages during the academic year 1993-94. Arrangements for enrolment and induction were inspected at the beginning of the autumn term. Curriculum area inspections followed in the spring term from January to March 1994. The process was completed by an inspection of cross-college aspects during the week of 21 to 25 March. Four inspector days were used on enrolment and induction, 95 inspector days on specialist inspections and 30 inspector days on cross-college assessment. The cross-college team included a senior college member of staff and an inspector whose recent experience is outside the world of education.

2 Inspectors visited a total of 294 classes, examined representative samples of students' work and held discussions with students, staff and members of the college corporation. They attended formal meetings of the management team, the academic board and the college corporation. The college's strategic plan, its assessment report, business plans, policy statements, position papers and minutes were examined. Meetings were held with local employers, parents, pupils and staff from neighbouring schools and the careers service. Views were sought from other partners such as Liverpool John Moores University, the local Education and Business partnership, the Training and Enterprise Council (Qualitec St Helens Ltd), the Department of Trade and Industry, and the Options Centre which offers education and training guidance to adults.

3 This report is based on the above inspections which were carried out according to the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. The framework describes a four-year inspection cycle. When this cycle becomes fully established, colleges will have the opportunity to respond to the findings of earlier inspection visits before their quadrennial inspections and the subsequent published report. As the inspection of St Helens College occurred early in the cycle, the opportunity for such a response was not available.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

4 St Helens is a large college with firm roots in a town characterised by long-term unemployment and few large employers. The college itself is the fourth largest employer in the borough and has a total of 762 staff, amounting to 604 full-time equivalents. Staff expressed as full-time equivalents are shown in figure 1. A stated aim of the college is to contribute towards the economic regeneration of the region. Most of its courses are vocational, and most students are adults attending on a part-time basis. Enrolments by age are shown in figure 2.

5 Currently, five very different sites are in use for teaching: a large multi-storey building in the town centre offering extensive provision; the upper floor of the town-centre library used for art and design; a newly-built technology centre for construction programmes; the skills

centre for road transport provision and a centre, dating from the late 19th century, in the neighbouring town of Newton-le-Willows. Current plans are that all work will be shared between the town-centre campus, the Newton-le-Willows campus and the technology campus. The college also has a residential block used mainly by students following higher education courses.

6 The college operates in a very competitive educational environment. Half of the 12 local comprehensive schools have sixth forms, including both the high schools in Newton-le-Willows. Carmel Catholic Sixth Form College is situated two miles away. The following seven colleges which collectively offer a similar range of vocational courses are within a radius of 15 miles: Knowsley Community College, Halton College, Skelmersdale College, Liverpool Community College, Warrington Collegiate Institute, Wigan and Leigh College and Hugh Baird College, Bootle.

7 There were 11,687 students on roll in November 1993, giving a total of 4,857 full-time equivalent students. Of these students, 9,652 (4,194 full-time equivalent) were funded by the FEFC, 2,848 attending full time and 6,804 attending part time. Students come mainly from within the borough, but the college is having increasing success in attracting students from further afield. This year, over 3,000 students, mainly part-time, are from outside the borough. Eight schools of study cover all major aspects of the curriculum, supplemented by a directorate of learning support. Enrolments, expressed as full-time equivalents, by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figure 3; enrolments by level of study are shown in figure 4.

8 Traditionally, the town of St Helens has been dependent on coal mining and glass making. Coal mining has disappeared but it is still the largest glass-making town in Europe. The economy of the town is now based upon glass manufacture, engineering, chemicals and service industries. The last market assessment report by the local Qualitec predicts a loss of jobs in metals, minerals and chemicals and other manufacturing industries and only a modest increase in employment in distribution, business and other services. Unemployment is consistently higher in St Helens (over 10 per cent) than in most of the north west. Males account for 76 per cent of those unemployed and the number of 16-24 year olds unemployed is above average. Over one-third of the registered total have been unemployed for more than a year. There are few large employers, the main one being Pilkingtons. Most companies are small, and have fewer than 50 employees. Careers service statistics for 1993 show that 58 per cent of pupils in the borough proceeded to further study after the age of 16. At General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), according to the Department for Education's Secondary Schools Performance Tables for 1993, 32 per cent of pupils gained grades A to C, as against the national average of 41 per cent.

9 Against this background, the college's declared mission is 'to be a college centred on St Helens with a wider regional role in both further and

higher education'. It aims to provide 'an accessible and comprehensive range of high quality education, training and services to individuals, industry and the community'. Key features of the mission statement include commitments to raising aspirations and to working in partnership. The college intends to achieve the former by creating a ladder of opportunity for students, supported by comprehensive guidance and counselling. It aims to work in partnership with Qualitec, employers, the local authority and higher education. Responsiveness, flexibility and creativity are seen as essential to its approach. The college is particularly strong in responding to the needs of individuals and the local community.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

10 The college offers a wide range of provision, particularly in vocational areas, as shown in the following table:

Courses	Number
NVQ or equivalent:	
level 1	59
level 2	128
level 3	70
level 4	48
level 5	7
Access to higher education options	5
Access to further education options	6
GCSE subjects	21
GCE A level subjects	22
Languages available	5
Vocational education consortium options	69

The college company also offers a programme of individually-tailored courses.

11 Students who have been traditionally under-represented in education have been attracted to the college. This has been achieved by making changes not only to the range of provision but also to the modes of attendance and by providing support to make attendance easier. The college's 'study plus' scheme awards eligible students a grant towards the cost of travel and equipment, although a college survey reports that many students only found out about this scheme on enrolment. Creche facilities enable parents of young children to attend courses.

12 For mature students, there is an extensive range of provision, which enables them to progress to other courses. The new access to further education course, together with adult basic education provision, offer clear points of entry for students requiring tasters and guidance or help with basic skills. Students on such courses are able to gain nationally-recognised qualifications. The access to higher education course has a wide range of

modules and provides a successful alternative route into higher education. Courses in the 'new opportunities' programme allow students to gain qualifications in a range of vocational areas. Students are able to mix and match modules from this wide portfolio and there are many examples of them making successful progress to other courses.

13 Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have access to a range of courses which enables them to progress successfully from separate specialist provision and join other courses. The wide range of courses which welcomes these students includes floristry and horticulture, hairdressing and beauty, GCSE and GCE A level. Students who have learning difficulties can also follow other courses leading to nationally recognised qualifications. A particular strength in this area is the introduction of the vocational access certificate which enables students to gain National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). However, not all courses offer external accreditation and this restricts opportunities for some students. Parents of students with learning difficulties are kept well informed of their children's progress. They speak highly of the supportive nature of the college in integrating students into its community.

14 A significant recent development is the creation of a vocational education consortium which provides courses for school pupils in the last two years of compulsory schooling. This successful programme runs in conjunction with the Education Business Partnership. Pupils receive taster courses in vocational areas in year 10 and an opportunity to build on these experiences and to develop portfolios for NVQ and General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) accreditation in year 11. In 1993-94, 850 students are taking advantage of these opportunities in a full range of vocational areas. Pupils value the opportunity to taste a wide variety of vocational options and to experience college life. All students within this programme are given equal opportunities to sample all courses.

15 A close relationship with the local education authority (LEA) has been maintained since incorporation. Community outreach classes in adult basic education are provided by college staff and sponsored by the LEA. Students are subsequently encouraged to sample college courses. There is effective work on many joint ventures with other education establishments through the Technical Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI). Projects include GNVQ developments, building a farm at a school for students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and active membership of an equal opportunities working party.

16 There are firm links with higher education. Several franchised courses from Liverpool John Moores University and the Certificate in Education (post-16) are available. College staff, of whom many are examiners and moderators, maintain close links with examining, accrediting and validating bodies.

17 The partnership with Qualitec is strong and productive. The principal is a member of the Qualitec board and strategic forum and other staff are involved in its sub-groups. Together the college and Qualitec promote and

run an adult learners' week and support the adult guidance work of the Options Centre.

18 There are good working relationships with local industry. Short courses are offered through the college company and there is a strong programme of student work experience placements. Art students, for example, are able to participate in a well co-ordinated work experience programme and the school of engineering has good links with industrial companies. Many students and staff have the opportunity to visit industry and industrialists are often invited to work with staff and students in the college. This has been a particular strength of NVQ courses in the business and management school. Further development is needed in areas such as the general education curriculum.

19 International links are impressive. The college sells training abroad, sponsors foreign students and is involved in work experience exchange programmes. These include exchange visits to Chalons-sur-Saone, St Helens' twin town, for hairdressing and catering students. The college has been involved in training for local government officers in Russia, teachers in Bratislava, workers at a glass works in Poland and for students from Malaysia. There is active promotion of foreign languages within the college. Travel and tourism students and higher national diploma design students already have language modules as part of their courses and the recent submission to run a higher national diploma course in construction contains modules in languages and European studies.

20 The college is seen as meeting the needs of the community it serves and has a good image in the community, especially in terms of its vocational work. Marketing is comprehensive and professional. Publicity material is written to a house style and is clear to read and informative. Recent student surveys have indicated that 85 per cent of students had seen publicity materials prior to enrolment; 79 per cent felt that their first contact with the college was handled either well or very well.

21 There is a comprehensive equal opportunities policy and an effective implementation strategy. The objectives of the college policy are to tackle discrimination, to compensate for disadvantage and to tackle harassment. The equal opportunities statement appears in the student handbook and forms part of the college induction programme for both staff and students. Awareness of these issues is high among staff. There are several curriculum initiatives, including 'women in construction' programmes. Although enrolments to many courses continue to reflect traditional gender imbalances, the college has done much to try and alter this. The proportion of people from ethnic minority backgrounds is small in St Helens (0.04 per cent) and this is reflected in the college population. However, positive steps are taken to encourage members of these communities to participate in courses. There has been, for example, a special project for the Chinese community.

22 Staff at all levels are aware of developments within further education and have responded quickly and well. The college has often been in the forefront of developments in NVQ and GNVQ. For example, in engineering courses, managers are thoroughly conversant with the requirements of the accrediting and validating bodies and have developed learning packages, assessment packages and supporting documentation which fully meet these requirements. The understanding of, and response to, developments in education and training are a particular strength of St Helens College.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

23 The college is well managed and is governed by an active and effective corporation of 17 members. The principal and three senior members of staff who have personnel, finance and estates responsibilities respectively, are executive members. The non-executive members represent a broad cross-section of local industrial, commercial, educational and community interests. There is representation from John Moores University of Liverpool and particularly strong representation from the local TEC. Close links with the local authority have been maintained by the inclusion of both the chief executive and the leader of the borough council on the corporation board, the latter as chair. The college has also recently established a college council of chairs or chief executives of regional organisations to advise on appropriate future developments.

24 Members of the corporation are aware of their responsibility and show a high degree of commitment and expertise. Meetings are set quarterly and focus on strategic issues. Attendance at meetings is good, their conduct business-like and debate is of a high quality. Supporting documentation is comprehensive. There are five subcommittees, all having clear remits. Key decision-making powers are routinely delegated by the corporation. The cycles of meetings are well planned. All governors have participated in a programme of training and there is an induction process for new members.

25 The management style of the college has received careful consideration and there is evidence of a clear sense of direction and purpose. The management structure has changed annually over the last five years, in line with corporation plans, towards a less hierarchical and more devolved structure. The management team currently consists of the principal, the two vice-principals, five directors (with cross-college responsibilities) and eight heads of schools of study. The management team meets fortnightly. Agendas cover a range of strategic issues and require the full involvement of all members. The college's other main forum is the academic board whose members advise the principal on the academic development of the college. Sub-groups are active and there is a clear pattern of delegation. Documentation to support meetings is good.

26 In most curriculum areas of the college, the management structure is clear, and responsibilities and accountability are understood by staff. The

quality of leadership, commitment and management practice is generally high. In areas of weakness the college is not afraid to take action to solve its problems. The management of cross-college matters such as personnel, finance and performance is well organised. Responsibility for health and safety, equal opportunities and student services is clearly allocated. The introduction of new initiatives is controlled effectively by the designation of a member of staff as project leader, usually supported by a working party.

27 The college's unit of funding from the FEFC for 1992-93, as recorded in the FEFC report, *'Funding Allocations 1993-94'*, was £3,004 per weighted full-time equivalent student. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges was £2,444. Summaries of the college's income and expenditure are shown in figures 5 and 6, respectively.

28 The college's planning process links activity to resources in a systematic and effective way. Business plans prepared by schools of study and directorates relate clearly to the academic or cross-college aims and targets as documented in the strategic plan. There is extensive delegation of budgets including staffing budgets to schools of study. There are strong incentives to manage efficiently. Quarterly performance reviews are conducted by reference to agreed performance indicators, and adjustments are made to budgets as necessary. Indicators include student retention and effective deployment of staff. Divisional plans reflect both college and school plans and there is developing practice in budget delegation at this level too. There is careful financial planning, monitoring and reporting, including monthly statements to the corporation's finance and general purposes committee.

29 Considerable progress has been made in the development and use of computer-based management information systems. A range of information, including performance indicators to inform quarterly reviews, is available from the systems. Clear policies and plans have been developed for management information systems which attempt to meet the likely future information requirements of both the college and external agencies. Learner tracking systems are in the process of being developed on a pilot basis. The documentation and support for users is good and a planned programme of staff development is underway. Direct access to the systems for academic staff is, however, restricted and the collection and use of data relating to students' attendances in workshops and learning resource centres requires improvement. The college is aware of these weaknesses and there are planned developments to address them.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

30 The central student guidance and admissions system, run by student services, is well developed, thorough and effective. Staff involved are helpful and generally well briefed. Impartial advice is offered to prospective students and account is taken of their differing backgrounds and needs. Good-quality information leaflets, produced to a consistent style, are

available for prospective students but they should be written more simply and clearly. Once potential students have identified possible areas of study, there is an effective system of referral by the student services unit to schools and divisions. Documentation is thorough and there are in-built tracking systems.

31 The college works in successful partnership with the careers service and many joint initiatives have been developed. Careers advisers based at the town-centre site are employed jointly by the college and the local authority careers service. There is also a careers advisory service based at the Newton site.

32 Enrolment to courses occurs at three, and in some cases six points in the year, with most enrolments in September. There are sensible separate arrangements in August for the many school-leavers who transfer to the college each year. There are welcoming facilities in the newly-built entrance hall for casual visitors to collect information, receive helpful career and educational guidance, and take part in preliminary interviews. The adjoining drop-in workshops for basic literacy and numeracy are open throughout the year.

33 Enrolment is a large undertaking in a college of this size. Overall, the process is an efficient and helpful one but there was excessive queuing at the town-centre site and some signposting was unclear. Signposting at the technology campus was excellent. Some students were unsure of the services available to them and some staff were not fully conversant with the range of courses and different attendance modes.

34 There is a thorough induction programme which students comment on favourably. The programme follows a common format throughout the college and is provided by course tutors. It comprises a one-day induction to the college which often includes a diagnostic assessment of numeracy and literacy skills followed by an introduction to the course which lasts a further three days for full-time students and proportionately less for part-time students. In mathematics, the outcomes of the diagnostic assessment are not used to guide tutors when they devise individual learning packs for students. As part of the college's overall quality assurance system, students and tutors contribute to the evaluation of the induction process in order to inform the further development of arrangements.

35 A sound framework for the assessment of students' prior learning has been developed. Documentation is comprehensive and well structured. It provides clear guidance for students and staff who wish to undertake the assessment of an individual student's past and current work as a contribution toward further qualifications. Although this process is still in its infancy, some useful initiatives have already been taken. There are examples of effective use in teacher education, horticulture, construction and engineering. In other areas, accreditation of prior learning is less developed.

36 There is variable practice in the use of individual action plans and records of achievement. In the best cases, work begun during the induction period is steadily built upon. There is a structured and formalised approach, and students are encouraged to see the relevance of such records to the planning of future learning and the recording of success. Individual action plans are a strong feature of work in basic education for adults. Such processes are little used in GCSE and GCE A level courses and are sketchy and unsystematic in some others.

37 Tutorial support is seen as a logical and necessary extension to induction and is provided for all students. There is a co-ordinator for tutorial work and tutorial materials are available to all tutors through the curriculum unit. A well-produced tutor handbook and resource packs on a number of topics are readily available. In many areas of the college, tutorial support is well developed and effective, although tutorial arrangements for part-time students are sometimes less formally identified than those for full-time students. Practice differs, but most full-time courses have a one-hour planned tutorial period each week. There is proportionately less time for part-time students. In some cases, however, the tutorial support has weaknesses: arrangements are too informal, the purpose is unclear and attendance poor.

38 Special support is provided for the 200 students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There is a clear enrolment and admissions policy and a variety of arrangements in place to assist their recruitment and subsequent participation in college life. Student services and other specialist staff are trained to respond to their particular requirements, especially during enrolment and induction. The college's vocational education consortium provision allows students to sample courses to help with course choice. A well-informed welfare rights officer is available, and there is specialist help for students with sensory impairment, emotional or behavioural difficulties.

39 Some learning support materials are not wholly suitable for these students and the student handbook is not easily understood by students with poor literacy skills. The learner support units provide good support for students with weaknesses in numeracy and literacy. Tutors in some areas, however, are not aware of how students improve when they are referred to these units and some students who have weaknesses are not referred for additional help.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

40 Of the 294 classes observed 67 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed the weaknesses. The following table summarises the grades given for the sessions inspected:

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade	1	2	3	4	5	Totals
GCE A/AS level		2	4	10	1	0	17
GCSE		3	9	9	1	0	22
GNVQ		2	16	14	4	0	36
NVQ		10	35	13	2	0	60
Other		44	72	35	6	2	159
Total		61	136	81	14	2	294

41 Students benefit from good learning experiences across an extensive range of courses and subject areas. Much of the best teaching provides a variety of well-paced activities which extend the students' learning. There is exemplary practice in art and design where there is a commitment to investigation, problem solving and creativity as well as professional presentation. Outstanding and innovative approaches are to be seen on some care and adult programmes. Project work in some engineering courses allows students to design and build equipment for local companies.

42 In many of the better sessions, teaching methods take account of the different learning needs within groups and ensure that clear links are made between different aspects of courses. Students are regularly encouraged to take responsibility for organising their own work. For example, business and administration tutors display significant strengths in guiding and assisting students to work effectively and at their own pace, in an attractive, realistic work environment. Teachers working with students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities provide opportunities for them to work alongside their peers in realistic work settings. Use is made of effective teaching aids in several subject areas. In leisure and tourism and computing courses, for example, good use is made of supported self- study packs, some of which have been developed in the college. Group work based on learning packages is of an exceptionally high standard in courses leading to teaching qualifications. Generally, teachers have high expectations of their students and value their contributions to classes.

43 There are, however, examples of poorer teaching. Some teachers of hairdressing, engineering, English and science dominate the sessions and provide few opportunities for students to contribute. There is too much reliance on students themselves to raise problems and insufficient systematic checks to ensure that learning is taking place. There are cases in mathematics and languages classes where there is a poor match of activity to the needs of learners. In isolated cases in science and horticulture, insufficient attention is paid to safety aspects. Some classes do not start punctually.

44 Relationships between staff and students are good. In many areas there is a stimulating learning environment which encourages students to work purposefully. In some of the adult programmes students spoke appreciatively of the support they receive from their tutors. Staff are knowledgeable about their subjects and display good levels of practical competence. In art and design, care, catering, construction and engineering, for example, the staff show considerable commitment to their work and this has allowed significant progress to be made in introducing new developments. In a very small minority of classes, teachers lack confidence in their subject or are not fully conversant with new curriculum initiatives.

45 Almost without exception, courses have clearly stated aims and objectives. In particular, the GNVQ programmes in catering, construction and engineering are coherently structured. In business, construction, leisure and tourism courses there is thorough integration of both the technical and core skill elements. In several other courses, however, particularly within general education, there is insufficient detailed planning of the ways in which core skills might be integrated. Schemes of work at GCE A level for English and mathematics courses are bare frameworks and there is insufficient detail to support efficient teaching.

46 Generally, students' written and practical assignments are well designed and of an appropriate standard. In the access courses and those leading to teaching qualifications, the criteria for assessment are shared with students in advance. Methods of assessment in adult basic education are sufficiently flexible and imaginative to allow for the wide range of abilities being catered for on individual programmes. In construction, horticulture and floristry effective measures are in place to ensure consistency of practical assessment and standardisation of procedures. There are, however, inconsistent approaches to assessment in mathematics and languages courses. In hairdressing, computing and English, insufficient use is made of formative assessment to identify weaknesses.

47 There are clear records of students' achievements in most programme areas. For example, in NVQ programmes in construction, records of progress are maintained by staff and students are provided with folders to enable them to maintain their own records of achievement, including any industrial assessments. Some records, however, are not sufficiently comprehensive and detailed to give an accurate picture of students' progress. In some GCSE and GCE A level courses only final assessments are recorded.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

48 People enrol on courses at St Helens College for many different reasons, at different times of the year and for different purposes. Aspirations, backgrounds and ages all differ. The presentation of examination results from such a broad spectrum of courses does not

acknowledge the significant numbers of students who do not complete courses but transfer to others that may be regarded as more suitable. There are very high non-completion rates on many courses and achievements in examinations and assessments range from excellent to poor.

49 In business and administration there are some excellent results. In shorthand transcription (with the exception of level 3), word-processing, typing and bookkeeping results are above national averages. Results for the higher national certificate in business and for the Institute of Purchasing and Supplies certificate (professional stage) are good. However, results for the Association of Accounting Technicians foundation level are poor and there are high non-completion rates on both first and national diplomas. In art and design, the target rates for success in full-time BTEC courses and internally-assessed courses are consistently achieved. There are good pass rates in hair and beauty and leisure programmes and high retention rates in the latter. Pass rates in care are 87 per cent in the NNEB diploma, 60 per cent in the BTEC national in health studies and 82 per cent in BTEC social care. A high proportion of students achieve their target qualification in horticulture and floristry, although there are many early leavers. Achievements in engineering courses at NVQ levels 1, 2 and 4 are less good than those at level 3. The success rate in construction has varied widely in successive years and many students have not achieved their target qualifications because of failure in the written component of the test.

50 Although adult students do well at GCSE, they are less successful at GCE A level. The percentage of adult candidates gaining grades A to C at GCSE in 1993 were: 70 per cent in English, 84 per cent in French, 92 per cent in German, 90 per cent in Spanish, and 88 per cent in art. In contrast, at advanced level the average points score (where grade A=10 points, grade E=2 points) of the 186 adult students who entered for fewer than two A levels or A/S equivalents was 1.6. Of the 50 adults entered for two or more A levels, the average points score was 3.6. Despite the pattern of high failure rates across the range of GCE A levels some students gained A or B grades in English, humanities and sociology. In both GCE A level and GCSE, many students do not complete their course. For example, of the 205 students enrolled for GCSE English in 1992, only 114 took the examination in 1993 and of those, 52 per cent gained grades from A to C.

51 Since there are comparatively few students aged 16-18, the college's position in national examination tables does not give a complete picture. For the 27 students in this age group who entered for two or more GCE A levels in 1993, the average points score was 3.2, placing the college close to the bottom of the national table for 16 to 18 year olds. In the same year, 208 students in this age group in their final year of study for the BTEC national or City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) national diplomas achieved an 83 per cent pass rate. This places the college around the half-way mark in the national tables for all institutions within the sector.

52 The externally-validated access to higher education course achieves good results and a substantial proportion of students gain full credits. Some basic education students gain nationally recognised qualifications but there is a lack of accreditation for a high proportion on introductory programmes. In some cases, students are achieving below their ability level and working towards an inappropriate qualification.

53 Students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are successful in progressing to other courses and to employment. Of the 134 learners who enrolled last year on the separate specialist programme for such students, 40 gained accreditation. At present, students do not have portfolios of evidence of their achievements which they can take with them to their next placement.

54 Most students are enthusiastic and enjoy their work. Many are well motivated and eager to learn. In particular, mature students show a high level of commitment. They are developing confidence and self esteem through attending the college. There is, however, a lack of interest by some younger students who need encouragement to use their time productively.

55 In all subject areas, students are generally developing the levels of knowledge and understanding required by their courses. In GNVQ programmes in engineering and business there is a strong emphasis on the development of knowledge which underpins practice. Many students are developing their communication skills. There are some good examples within hairdressing, construction, history, sociology, languages and adult programmes, of students speaking confidently and contributing well to discussion and debate. Written work is more variable in quality. In the better examples, students are making considerable efforts to engage with the task and to present their work effectively. Some students use word-processing skills to good effect. There are, however, some students with weaker writing skills, particularly on some computing, construction and office technology courses. Grammatical errors and spelling mistakes should be corrected systematically.

56 Students following courses in care, leisure and tourism and engineering show good development of core skills; some horticulture students have weaknesses in this area. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are developing skills which will enable them to live independently and organise themselves and their work. Several students are now able to travel independently as a result of the tuition they have received. In art and design, engineering, business studies and leisure and tourism courses students are able to use computer software to good effect. There are, however, other areas of the curriculum, including history, sociology, mathematics and English, where the development of information technology skills is not much in evidence. An insufficient number of adult basic education students are able to demonstrate skills of this kind.

57 There are many examples of students working productively in pairs or in larger groups. In those courses leading to teaching qualifications,

students speak of the support and encouragement they receive from their peers in group activities. There was particularly effective teamwork in catering courses where students were preparing food and serving it to members of the public. In some subject areas, however, students have few opportunities to engage in group activities.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

58 A well-defined quality policy was published in November 1993 and there is a systematic approach to quality assurance. A comprehensive framework for the development of new procedures and practices draws together a number of quality initiatives. Written guidance has been issued to all members of staff. The development of quality systems, procedures and measures is effectively controlled and co-ordinated by the academic board and the senior management team. Key areas and processes have been identified from the strategic plan for priority attention. Most current business plans include specific actions for setting standards and targets relating to college-wide quality statements and criteria. As part of a total quality management initiative, the college has experimented with quality circles with variable levels of success.

59 There is a framework for programme monitoring, evaluation and reporting which is applicable to most curriculum areas. It is inappropriate, however, for single subjects in the general education area. In order to strengthen that framework, a manual on programme management and learner tracking has recently been produced and is now being piloted. The manual includes the current quality assurance procedures and practices, on which reports are based. Most reports are extensive and take account of students' views, which are obtained both from discussions and formal surveys. Further improvements are being considered.

60 All programmes which require accreditation by external awarding bodies are subjected to internal validation procedures to check compliance with both internal and external requirements. Reports from external moderators and assessors have been excellent and the college has been responsive to issues raised. Authorisation has recently been given by BTEC for the college to make approval and validation decisions as part of the BTEC Centre Initiative.

61 All management teams are fully aware of the requirements of the national charter for further education. A draft students' charter has been produced which addresses most requirements and is now subject to wider consultation prior to publication and full implementation by July 1994.

62 There is a comprehensive staff development policy. Almost all staff have had some relevant development experience in the last two years. These activities take account of strategic objectives and their benefits to the individual and to the college are evaluated. There is an induction programme for all new staff and a comprehensive induction pack. The induction process is subject to evaluation by participants and continuous review.

63 There is an appraisal scheme in operation to identify training and development needs particularly for new members of staff. The implementation of the scheme is progressing in accordance with timetabled plans to include all staff within the current academic year. However, the process does not give importance to classroom observations and personal objectives are not being set. A revised scheme, linked to targets and performance-related pay, is being piloted.

64 In most areas, staff training and development needs are being addressed. Exceptions include aspects of support for GNVQ programmes in science, art and design and in some general education programmes. More attention should be given to teacher placements in industry and to the updating of technical knowledge and skills.

RESOURCES

Staffing

65 Most staff, both full-time and part-time, are well qualified and experienced for the work they carry out. Within the staff as a whole there is a range of industrial and commercial experience but in mathematics and science some teachers lack recent, relevant experience for the courses they are teaching. In all areas, staff demonstrate considerable commitment to their work and to the well-being of their students. In general, there are sufficient numbers of teachers, instructors and technicians to support existing courses. New staff have been appointed to cover shortage areas. However, some aspects of information technology provision would benefit from increased levels of technician support.

66 Staff recruitment and deployment is effectively planned and over the last three years the policy has been to increase the number of support staff in relation to academic staff. There are policies on staff-related matters such as occupational health and equal opportunities. The college aims to be non-discriminatory in employment and to provide positive encouragement to women and men to apply for posts on equal terms. There is a good gender balance on the staff, and about 40 per cent of posts at divisional management level and above are held by women.

Equipment/learning resources

67 Equipment provision is generally sound and major investment in some areas, for example, construction and engineering, has resulted in the provision of exceptionally good learning environments. Other areas, such as hairdressing and beauty therapy, are less well equipped although the college's study plus scheme helps students to purchase their own salon clothing and specialised tools and equipment. In business studies, there is a disparity in provision between the town-centre and Newton sites. The provision of small tools and equipment for horticulture is good although there is a lack of larger machines such as tractors. Resources for ceramics work are exceptionally good.

68 Computer resources are good and some areas have access to sophisticated software packages and up-to-date, high specification hardware. Nevertheless, there are inequalities of provision across the college. For example, in science, there are few computers readily available in laboratory areas. A relatively high proportion of the equipment is unable to operate the latest industry-standard, windows-based software packages. There is also a lack of computer software for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

69 The quality and use of teaching and learning support materials is variable. In the best practice, for example, in business studies, engineering and GCSE English at the Newton site, materials are produced to a high specification and their use is clearly integrated into the teaching. While resources to support GCSE mathematics students in workshops are good, other resource provision for mathematics is poor. Centrally, the college's curriculum unit has an extensive range of both college and commercially- produced materials which are of good quality.

Accommodation

70 The standard of accommodation at the college's five teaching sites is variable although, on balance, strengths clearly outweigh weaknesses. Governors and senior managers are committed to improving the accommodation and facilities. There is a major capital programme for a phased approach to the improvement of accommodation and a rolling programme of redecoration. Since 1991, when eight sites were in use, there has been a move to rationalise the teaching accommodation on to three sites.

71 The college's main town-centre site provides accommodation for many important areas including management and business studies, computing, engineering, hairdressing and beauty therapy, GCSE and GCE A level studies, catering, science, media and adult basic education. Accommodation on this site has been re-allocated, re-furnished and progressively improved over the last few years and the process is still continuing. Particularly notable improvements include the creation of an impressive new entrance forum which links the college to the shopping centre. High quality accommodation for student services and a suite of suitably furnished and resourced learning workshops for numeracy, communication and other skills are located in this well-positioned entrance hall. Some former motor vehicle accommodation has been refurbished to provide a high technology suite for engineering. Other refurbished accommodation provides a good learning environment for computing, science and business studies. Nevertheless, there are still on this site some areas of relatively poor accommodation, including that for hairdressing and beauty therapy, and for tourism and leisure.

72 The Newton-le-Willows site provides accommodation for a range of work including caring courses, business studies, office technology, horticulture, teacher education and GCSE and GCE AS and A level courses.

Although it has been extended and improved on a number of occasions, accommodation here is generally of poorer quality than that at the town-centre site. Further major refurbishment of some buildings is imminent. Planned developments include the demolition of some existing temporary buildings and a new building programme. Some of the accommodation on this site, for instance the library block which includes the public library, is of high quality.

73 The new technology campus, less than a mile from the main site, is located at a new business development which includes the offices of the local TEC, an education-business partnership and the St Helens borough agency for economic regeneration. At present this campus only provides accommodation for work in construction but, in time, it will house virtually all aspects of the college's provision in engineering and technology. Accommodation here is purpose built and of very high quality. Once complete, this campus will provide a learning environment for engineering and technology students which exceeds in quality that of most other educational providers regionally or nationally.

74 Overall, there is efficient use of classroom and specialist accommodation. Most classrooms are maintained in a clean and tidy condition, are adequately and often well-furnished and, in general, are well matched to the size and particular needs of student groups. Some rooms, however, are poorly appointed, sparse and uninvitingly furnished and they fail to provide a sufficiently stimulating environment. In some rooms the layout of furniture restricts teaching styles. In most vocational areas, the specialist accommodation provides realistic working environments and, for example, catering, construction and engineering have a good range of accommodation for practical work. There are good open-access facilities for computing.

75 Library facilities at the three main sites are good. At the town-centre site, facilities are attractive, welcoming and well-ordered. The book stock is wide-ranging. There is a good proportion of recently purchased books including some for higher education, but in some subject areas such as history, sociology, education and engineering there is a significant number of older books. At the Newton site, there is extensive provision for social care, including a toy library used by nursery classes, and library provision for horticulture. The library at the technology campus has a good range of relevant books.

76 Many improvements have been made to improve accessibility for students with problems of mobility within the college. However, some areas, including science at the town-centre site are not easily accessible to such students.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

77 This rich and diverse college is rooted in its community and has a keen sense of purpose. It is making significant progress in the achievement of its mission. The strengths of its provision are:

- good teaching in many curriculum areas
- good relationships between staff and students
- high levels of commitment from adult students
- well-developed student support services and comprehensive recruitment, guidance and induction process
- some exceptionally good accommodation, good equipment and high-quality teaching materials
- sensitivity and responsiveness to local needs and extensive educational and industrial links
- a very positive image in the community particularly in respect of its vocational courses
- effective management and governance
- systematic planning processes and performance monitoring
- comprehensive quality assurance framework.

78 In order to improve further the quality of its provision, the college should:

- complete and carry through its review of general education provision
- look more systematically at the reasons why students do not complete courses and achieve their target qualifications.

FIGURES

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- 1 Staff profile - staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1993-94)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by age (1993-94)

 - 3 Enrolments expressed as full-time equivalents by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1993-94)

 - 4 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1993-94)

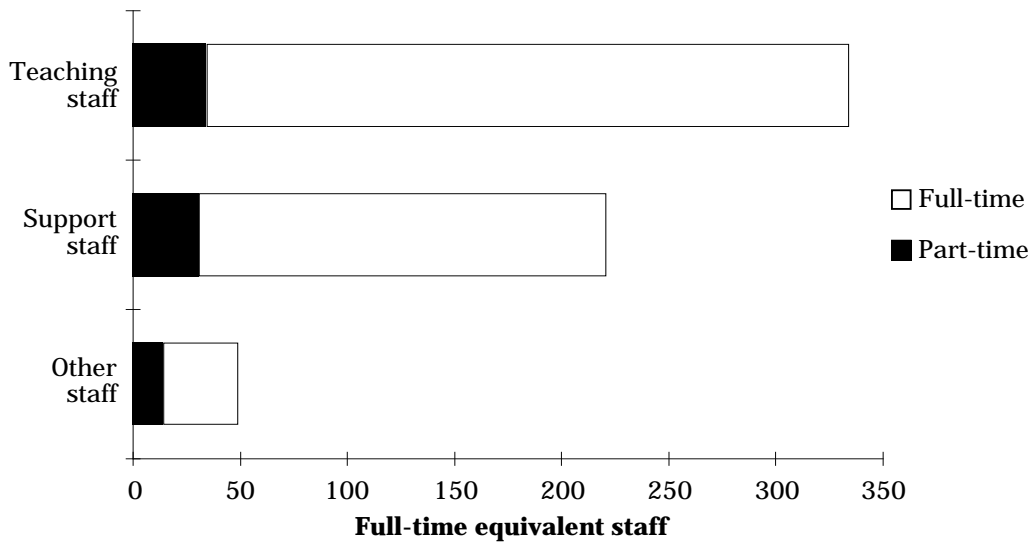
 - 5 Recurrent income (1993-94)

 - 6 Estimated expenditure (1993-94)

Note: the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

Figure 1

St Helens College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1993-94)

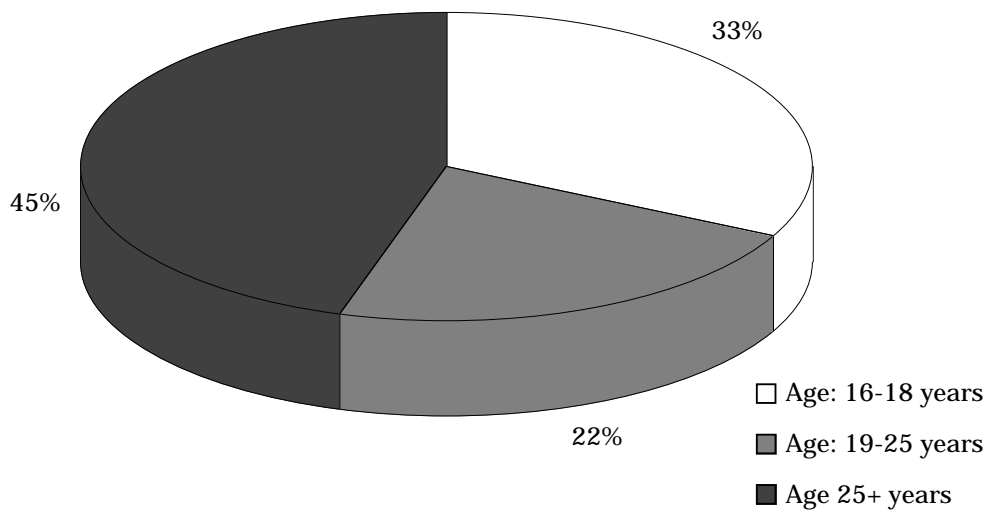


Note: Other staff include instructors, classroom assistants, learning supervisors, training co-ordinators and learning support staff.

Full-time equivalent staff: 604

Figure 2

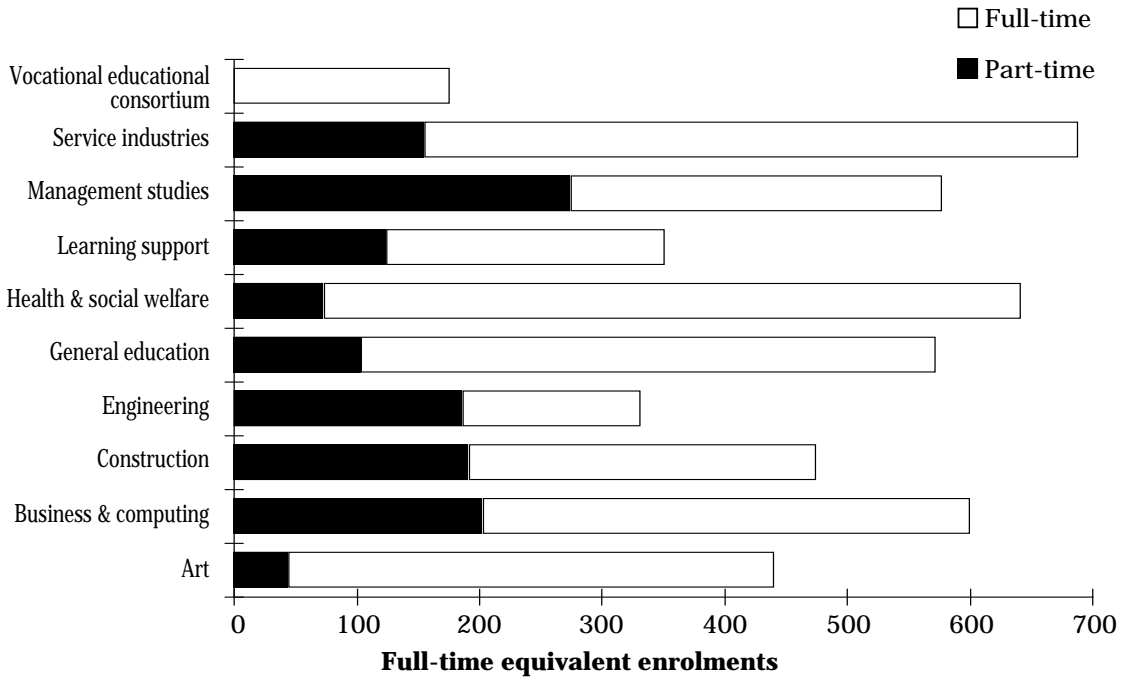
St Helens College: percentage enrolments by age (1993-94)



Enrolments: 11,687

Figure 3

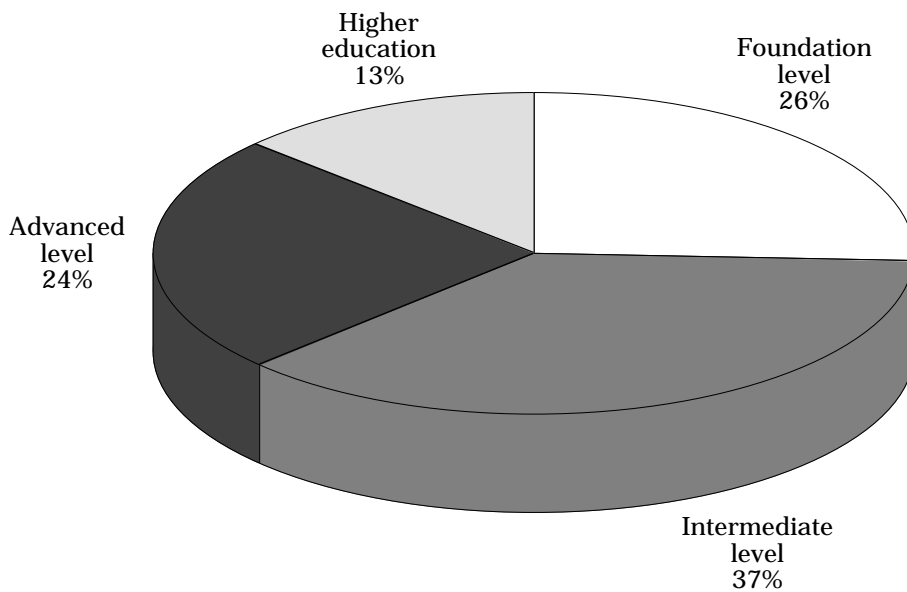
St Helens College: enrolments expressed as full-time equivalents by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1993-94)



Full-time equivalent students: 4,857

Figure 4

St Helens College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1993-94)



Enrolments: 11,687

Figure 5

St Helens College: recurrent income (1993-94)

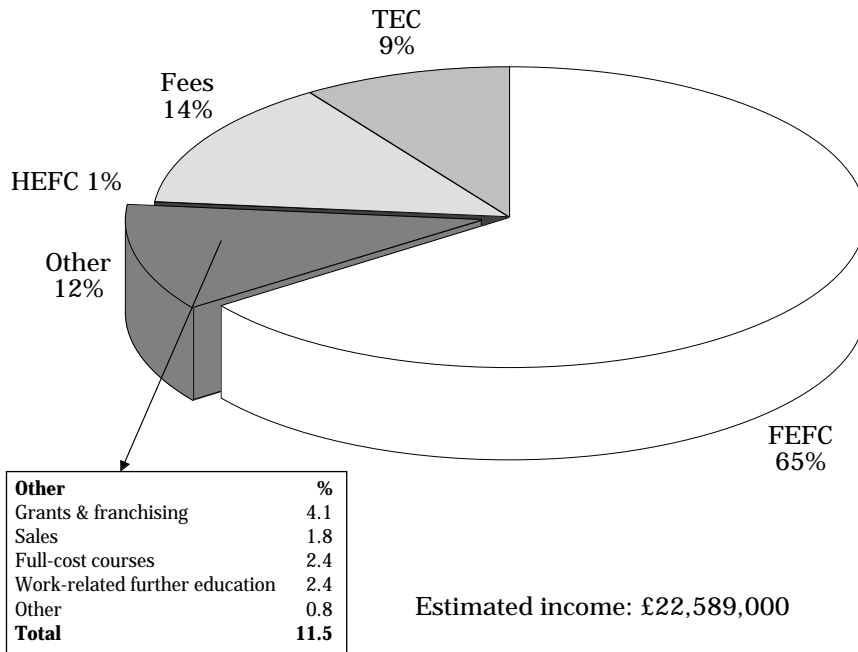
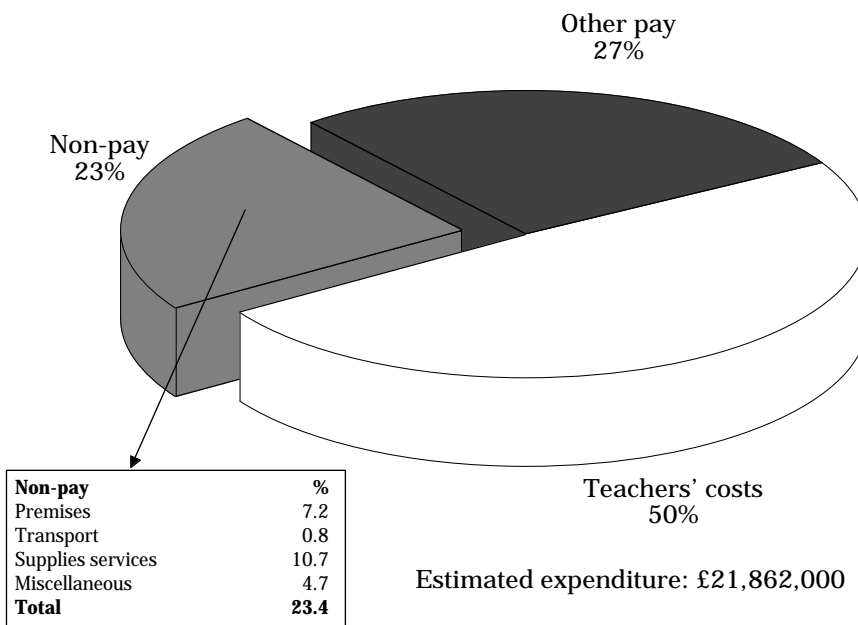


Figure 6

St Helens College: estimated expenditure (1993-94)



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