

Plumpton College

Inspection Report 4-8 June 2007

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. Plumpton College is a small further education college specialising in education and training to support rural industries. It is designated an agricultural college, but relationships with businesses and employers and the training offered span the whole range of land-based businesses. The college's mission is to provide 'excellent education and training'.
2. The main college campus is on a large rural estate some ten miles from the city of Brighton and Hove. There is a small centre at Netherfield which provides mainly part-time programmes and further provision is available at a range of sites across the area. Residential accommodation is offered for some 125 learners on the main site.
3. The college provides full- and part-time courses from entry level to level 3, and foundation degree and degree programmes in partnership with the University of Brighton. Programmes are offered mostly within the agriculture and sport sector areas including agriculture and countryside, horticulture and floristry, animal care, veterinary nursing, rural machinery and engineering, forestry and arboriculture, equine studies, wine studies and outdoor education. Work-based learning is provided for some 130 learners. The college has recently started to deliver Train to Gain provision through a partnership arrangement. There is a growing 14-16 programme involving 40 local schools. The college leads a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in rural business management training and is a partner in CoVEs for sport and horticultural technologies. It is an accredited Action for Business College. It holds Investor in People status and matrix accreditation for information, advice and guidance (IAG) work with schools, learners and employers.
4. Learners are recruited from a wide area across Sussex and Kent including around 143 schools in the south east. The number of full-time learners has increased significantly since the last inspection. In 2005/06, there was a total of 2,909 learners of which 1,600 were on long programmes. Two thirds of learners were adults. Of those enrolled on full-time courses, 47% were 16-18 learners. The proportion of learners from minority ethnic groups in 2005/06 was 2% and 36% of all learners were female.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: grade 2
Achievement and standards	Outstanding: grade 1
Quality of provision	Good: grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: grade 2
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Good: contributory grade 2</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: grade 2

5. Plumpton is a good college. It successfully encourages learners to develop positive attitudes to learning and work in the rural industries. Provision has expanded considerably since the last inspection. The college has improved accommodation and increased employer engagement and its provision of support for rural communities. Overall, achievement and standards are outstanding. Learners make good progress and develop a wide range of personal, professional and social skills.
6. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Many teachers make very good use of their vocational expertise and the college estate to make learning relevant and stimulating. Assessment is well planned and support for learners with additional needs is very good. There is insufficient planning for individual learners' needs. The use of information learning technology (ILT) is under-developed. Good practice is not shared effectively. The college has evaluated teaching and learning accurately.
7. The college's approach to meeting the needs and interests of learners and to social and educational inclusion is outstanding. A wide range of courses is provided for learners of all ages including 14-16 learners, young people often characterised by underachievement and disaffection, learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, employers and the local community. Progression opportunities are available from entry to degree courses. Partnership work is excellent. Learners enjoy their time at college and participate fully in the extensive social and enrichment activities. These provide excellent opportunities for learners to achieve additional qualifications.
8. Guidance and support for learners are good. Thorough advice, guidance and assessment ensure learners are on the right courses and support progression onto further education, training and employment. Learners' additional support needs are identified and very good support significantly improves learners' achievements. The quality of tutorial support is variable.
9. Leadership and management are good. Leaders and managers are carefully modernising the college, developing a strong performance culture and promoting high standards. Governance is good. The college is a welcoming, safe and purposeful learning environment and promotes equality of opportunity effectively. Quality improvement arrangements are inconsistent. Overall, the college provides very good value for money.

Capacity to improve

Good: grade 2

10. The college has good capacity to improve. It continues to invest considerably in developing a sustainable, continuously improving, learning community. There is a strong focus on improving achievement and standards, and performance is rigorously monitored. The college is well prepared to respond effectively to a volatile external environment. There are a growing number of effective initiatives to improve provision and widen participation. Leadership is strong and supportive and there are extremely high levels of staff commitment and determination to further raise standards.
11. Quality assurance processes are incomplete although a very effective observation of teaching and learning processes has recently been introduced. The college's self-assessment report is generally accurate although there is insufficient focus on some aspects of provision. The college has a good record in meeting challenging targets.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

12. The college has made good progress since the last inspection in 2003. During a period of considerable growth and improvement of facilities, performance has improved. Success rates are outstanding in many areas. Achievement in key skills is high. Assessment and framework completion for work-based learners has recently improved and is now satisfactory for apprentices. Weaknesses in teaching and learning have been identified rigorously. The college has made good progress in improving access for students with restricted mobility. The quality of tutorials remains variable.

Key strengths

- outstanding success rates
- excellent employer engagement and partnership work
- the development of a strong performance culture
- strong and positive ethos to support high levels of participation and enjoyment of learning
- outstanding approach to meet the needs and interests of learners
- very good financial and resource management
- strong strategic leadership and careful management of the modernisation of the college
- very good focus on the contribution of training to rural industries and the national skills agenda.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- further development of the quality of teaching and learning
- the formal planning of individual learning and tutorials
- the rigour and consistency of quality improvement
- the identification and sharing of good practice across the curriculum
- the quality of work-based learning
- the rigour and comprehensiveness of self-assessment.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Outstanding: grade 1

Contributory grades:

Work-based learning

Satisfactory: grade 3

13. Achievement overall is outstanding. Since the last inspection, the college has continued to improve overall success rates. Success rates on long and short courses are mostly well above national averages for similar specialist colleges. Retention rates are very high on all programmes and 94% of learners are still on their programme in the current year.
14. Learners aged 16-18 achieve particularly well at levels 1 and 2. Success rates at level 2 exceed the national average for similar colleges by 22%. In 2005/06, some 92% of all 16-18 year old learners gained their qualifications. Success rates for adults are good and many adults continue to succeed at all levels. However, success rates for adults have declined and at level 3 were only just above the national average for similar colleges in 2005/06. Success rates for apprenticeships are improving and currently in 2006/07, rates are satisfactory at 55%. However, the achievements of advanced apprentices are very low. Pass rates for key skills are very good and in 2005/06, 78% of 16-18 year old learners achieved qualifications. Pass rates on skills for life qualifications are satisfactory. Success rates for learners requiring additional support have significantly increased. For adult learners, rates increased from 58% in 2004/05 to 76% in 2005/06. Success rates are now comparable to those for learners who do not require support. Self-assessment accurately identifies areas for further improvement.
15. Success rates are very good for 14-16 year old learners and there is strong progression to college programmes. Learners achieve higher grades in BTEC diploma courses than national averages. There is little difference between the performance of different groups of learners. The overall attendance rates are very high and have increased from 89% in 2005/06 to 93% in the current year. Learners achieve a wide range of additional qualifications to support the development of vocational expertise and employment skills.
16. The college welcomes learners with low prior attainment. Learners make good progress and achieve good standards on the majority of courses. Written work is well presented. There is insufficient setting of broader and more challenging written work on some level 3 courses. Learners develop personal skills, the ability to work in teams and gain self-confidence. They

behave very well, enjoy their studies and enthusiastically talk about the value of learning at Plumpton College. They develop very good practical skills relevant to future employment and gain a comprehensive understanding of health and safety. Work-based learners enjoy good commercial work placements. The college celebrates the achievements of learners including the achievement of a range of external awards, such as metalsmithing sculpture and floristry gold medals, demonstrating high levels of skill and expertise.

Quality of provision

Good: grade 2

Contributory grades:

Work-based learning

Satisfactory: grade 3

17. Inspectors agreed with the college's judgements that the overall quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. The college recently introduced a revised system for observing lessons in order to reduce the high proportion of lessons that it has identified as satisfactory. Just over half of lessons are satisfactory. Lesson observation is now robust, and provides detailed and highly valued feedback to teachers on how to improve. The evaluation of strengths and areas for development arising from lesson observation is done well and clearly linked to staff development plans. However, this process has not yet impacted significantly on the quality of lessons. There is insufficient sharing of good practice in teaching and learning.
18. Teachers make good use of their vocational expertise and the college's estate is used effectively to enhance learning. Practical work, such as weighing sheep, is used well to develop numeracy skills. In less effective lessons, teachers use an insufficient range of teaching approaches to stimulate and meet learners' needs. They do not always check learners' understanding or use focused questioning to develop learning. The planning of individual learning is underdeveloped. Teachers depend too much on their informal understanding of individual learner needs and learning plans often contain insufficient detail to fully inform lesson planning. For apprentices, this lack of detail limits plans for the timely completion of frameworks.
19. The college is increasing its investment in ILT resources and training, but the use of ILT to enhance learning is under-developed. Students have insufficient access to computers during the current development of campus facilities.

20. Key skills development is well managed and relevant to learners' programmes. Key skills and vocational teachers work effectively as teams and lessons are lively, stimulating and learners achieve well.
21. Assessment is well planned and feedback to learners is generally good, although some is insufficiently focused on how learners can improve their work and achieve better results. Assessment and verification for work-based learners have improved since the last inspection. Learners' experience of work placement is used with varying effectiveness to inform learning. Employers receive insufficient information to enable effective planning of the learning during work experience and volunteering.
22. An on-line system for individual learner review has been extended throughout the college, but there is still too much variation in the quality and frequency of reviews. In the best reviews, learners are knowledgeable about their target grades and what they need to do to achieve them. However, targets are often insufficiently precise to support improvement.
23. The college's approach to meeting the needs and interests of learners and to social and educational inclusion is outstanding. The college is an inclusive and happy community. The curriculum is diverse and staff work hard to engage with the interests of learners. A wide range of qualifications, including additional qualifications to support employability, are available. There are clear progression routes between courses including higher education. A high proportion of learners progress within the college. Excellent initiatives include partnership arrangements to help the college provide courses for excluded or vulnerable learners. The college effectively removes key barriers for learners, including provision of transport and accommodation. Learners, including those with special educational needs, have good opportunities to gain qualifications, including Skills for Life qualifications. Programmes for 14-16 year old learners are very successful and achievement and progression rates into further education and employment are very high.
24. The college makes excellent use of industry, school and employer views to develop new provision. The college is very responsive to the farming community's needs and maintains valuable links with farmers across Sussex. The college works hard to ensure training for the rural industries is relevant and contemporary. There is good sharing of resources with community groups to open up the college to a wider group of people. Work-based learning employers are closely involved in and have a good awareness of the programme and its contribution to their business.

25. Learners participate in an extensive range of enrichment activities including sport, external visits, charity, social and residential activities. Learners extend their interests and skills during work experience, gain industry standard certificates of competence and successfully compete in shows and competitions. Residential learners enjoy a good range of recreational activities in the evening.
26. The quality of guidance and support is good. The college's supportive culture places high emphasis on helping learners to actively participate in and enjoy their learning. Learners receive excellent support for a wide range of pastoral, welfare and personal issues. The college makes good use of very effective links with community organisations to support learners' health and moral wellbeing. Resident students have excellent support and individual tutorials with the wardens to support the transition into living away from home.
27. Prospective learners attend thorough initial interviews and guidance sessions which ensure enrolment on appropriate courses. Learners have realistic expectations about their chosen course. Learners are given very good advice and guidance to support their progression to further education, training and employment. Induction is effective. Individual literacy and numeracy needs are diagnosed and additional learning support is very good.
28. The college has improved the tutorial process since the last inspection but the quality remains variable. For some learners, tutorials are too infrequent, some target setting is weak and the recording of many tutorial discussions is insufficient. Target setting on Train to Gain programmes is insufficient.
29. During progress reviews, work-based learners often have insufficient opportunities for confidential discussions with their reviewer. Some employers have too little information about learners' specific learning or personal development issues to fully support them. Learners and parents receive end-of-term reports, which are of variable quality.

Leadership and management

Good: grade 2

Contributory grades:

Equality of opportunity
Work-based learning

Good: grade 2
Satisfactory: grade 3

30. Leadership and management are good. Leadership is positive, supportive and managers and staff strive for excellence. The college governors and

principal have made very good progress with long-term plans to preserve the college's long-term viability through a carefully managed growth and diversification strategy. Modernisation, including the shift to a stronger performance culture, has been managed skilfully and the college has continued to improve the experience of learners. Success rates indicate that college performance is at the top of the sector including both general further education colleges and specialist colleges. Strategic planning and responsiveness to governmental priorities are excellent. The college's responsiveness to the needs of the rural community is outstanding. Governance continues to be good and governors monitor college performance rigorously. There is good contact between governors and heads of department and student governors play a full role in corporation and committee work.

31. Curriculum management has recently improved through a restructure of departments to support the college's long-term growth strategy. Heads of department have a very good understanding of college priorities and strategy. Excellent arrangements are in place to involve local employers in curriculum planning through curriculum advisory panels. Staff development is good and a substantial proportion of the college budget is allocated annually to training and development. There are clear and effective links between lesson observation, appraisal, course review and staff development activity.
32. Communications within the college are excellent. Staff, managers and governors are very well informed about developments in curriculum and college strategy. Staff have good opportunities to contribute and shape new policies. The principal reviews the progress of all learners termly, and has a welcome interview with all full-time learners during their first term in the college.
33. Partnerships are strong and enhance the role of education in the development of rural industries, contribute to capacity building within the region and support the widening of participation.
34. Quality improvement is satisfactory. Departmental managers use data effectively to monitor performance of individual courses during the self-assessment process. However, the range of performance indicators is insufficiently wide to ensure adequate monitoring and quality improvement in all aspects of college performance. The quality and accuracy of course team reviews vary across departments and between curriculum areas. A rigorous lesson observation scheme has recently been introduced but arrangements to identify and share best practice are incomplete.

35. Self-assessment is inclusive, timely and generally accurate at college level. However, at department and course team level, self-assessment reports do not sufficiently inform quality improvement. Work-based learning and Skills for Life provision have insufficient prominence in the self-assessment process.
36. The college's promotion of equal opportunities is good. The college provides a welcoming, safe and purposeful learning and work environment. It is increasingly successful in engaging with learners who have underachieved and whose experience of education is characterised by disaffection. Data on students' progress by ethnicity, age and gender are reviewed frequently by managers. The college complies with the statutory requirements in relation to equality, disability and race relations. At the last inspection, access for students with restricted mobility was inadequate. Access is now satisfactory at all main buildings. The college disability equality steering group has good student representation and monitors the disability equality scheme well. The college's arrangements for protecting and safeguarding children and vulnerable adults are very good. Insufficient attention is given to the development of students' understanding of diversity in lessons or review meetings for apprentices. The college is yet to develop a strategy and plan of action to formally integrate Skills for Life across the curriculum.
37. The college provides very good value for money. Financial and risk management are strong and resources are deployed efficiently, including good use of the college estate to support learning. The college's diverse range of income is well managed. A major building project is underway which will substantially extend classrooms, learning centres and residential space. The developments have been carefully phased to avoid disruption to current provision. There is a clear focus on raising standards and creating a sustainable and improving learning community.

Learners' achievements

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age 2004 to 2006, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
1 Long	03/04	360	77	62	15	242	66	49	17
	04/05	498	82	65	17	319	78	62	16
	05/06	378	80			275	68		
GNVQs and precursors	03/04								
	04/05								
	05/06								
NVQs	03/04	8	75	71	4	103	54	59	-5
	04/05	27	81	60	21	81	72	71	1
	05/06	52	65			94	56		
Other	03/04	352	77	61	16	139	74	49	25
	04/05	471	82	66	16	238	81	61	20
	05/06	326	83			181	74		

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age 2004 to 2006, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
2 Long	03/04	158	80	62	18	259	70	55	15
	04/05	181	78	68	10	247	78	61	17
	05/06	213	90			362	74		
GCSEs	03/04								
	04/05								
	05/06								
GNVQs and precursors	03/04					12	75		
	04/05	7	71	73	-2	18	83		
	05/06	5	80			35	91		
NVQs	03/04					48	79	43	36
	04/05	3	67			51	86	54	32
	05/06	8	63			41	68		
Other	03/04	158	80	63	17	199	68	57	11
	04/05	171	78	69	9	178	75	62	13
	05/06	200	91			286	73		

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age 2004 to 2006, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
3 Long	03/04	123	68	65	3	107	58	49	9
	04/05	157	75	69	6	137	61	56	5
	05/06	163	71			172	59		
A/A2 Levels	03/04								
	04/05								
	05/06								
AS Levels	03/04								
	04/05								
	05/06								
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	8	87	45	42	2	50		
	04/05								
	05/06								
NVQs	03/04					15	47	41	6
	04/05	1	0			16	94	46	48
	05/06					35	34		
Other	03/04	115	67	66	1	90	60	52	8
	04/05	156	76	68	8	121	57	58	-1
	05/06	167	71			137	66		

Table 4

Success rates on **work-based learning programmes** managed by the college 2004 to 2006.

Programme	End Year	Success Rate	No, of learners *	College NVQ rate **	National NVQ rate **	College framework rate **	National framework rate **
Advanced Apprenticeships	03/04	overall					
		timely					
	04/05	overall					
		timely					
	05/06	overall	1	0	54	0	44
		timely	1	0	34	0	27
Apprenticeships	03/04	overall	25	60	47	36	32
		timely	24	54	24	29	16
	04/05	overall	61	72	50	59	38
		timely	61	54	29	46	22
	05/06	overall	57	51	58	32	53
		timely	58	45	38	29	33

- * Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned
- ** College and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'
- *** Adult training (long courses) includes 'Train to Gain' provision, but not 'Skills for Life'

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