

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms M Gilling
Principal
Walsall Adult and Community College
Hawbush Road
Walsall
WS3 1AG

Dear Ms Gilling

Ofsted 2010–11 survey inspection programme: numeracy – tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 12 and 13 October 2010 to look at your work in numeracy.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with managers, tutors and learners; scrutiny of relevant documents; analysis of learners' work; and observation of seven learning sessions in numeracy.

Overall, the Walsall Adult and Community College is satisfactory at tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives.

Key findings

- The college provides a satisfactory range of numeracy programmes across Walsall. The programmes aim to meet needs identified over a period of years, mainly based on anticipated skills deficiencies in areas of deprivation. Learners appreciate having courses available at local centres. The college is successfully extending numeracy provision through projects with council departments, schools and other partners.
- The number of learners on numeracy courses continues to grow, with a 14% increase between 2008/09 and 2009/10. The growth is largely in courses for qualifications at the higher levels, driven by the growing need for numeracy qualifications in some careers, such as teaching assistants and care workers.

- The management of the Skills for Life provision is satisfactory, although the college is still implementing some aspects of the reorganisation of this area of work, since the recent merger of two colleges. Staff have appropriate qualifications in teaching numeracy. The observations of learning sessions are constructively critical and aid improvement. This process has identified a need to improve further standards in teaching and learning. A relatively recent college staff development programme is now helping tutors to improve their performance. Professional development for numeracy tutors in 2009/10 did not focus on subject-specific aspects as well as it did in previous years.
- The classroom practice observed during the visit was generally satisfactory. In the better sessions, tutors set numeracy calculations in interesting contexts, and they used a good variety of activities that were demanding for learners of all abilities. All sessions had a good mix of general class activity and individual learning. The specific objectives tutors set for each learner in every session were appropriate and guided individuals and tutors in their work. Vocational tutors were adept at reinforcing numeracy in their programmes. In the less effective sessions, tutors attempted to assess learners' understanding of a topic before they had had sufficient time to grasp fully the subject matter.
- Classes are small, averaging around seven learners. Volunteers or support workers help in a minority of classes and they provide effective support to improve learners' understanding and skills. Learners welcome the individual attention and the encouragement the tutors, volunteers and fellow learners provide. However, the college does not provide sufficient computers for use in sessions.
- Outcomes for learners are good. The majority of learners are on programmes for qualifications at level 2, and these have success rates well above the average for similar provision. Most other courses have success rates slightly above national averages, with the exception of entry level course success rates which were low in 2009/10. Tutors encourage independent learning very effectively, particularly through their use of session objectives for each learner. Learners improve their confidence in the routine application of numeracy because of the frequent use of everyday examples; this is a particular feature of the provision for learners with learning difficulties.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- continuing to use lesson observations, management support and professional development programmes to improve the quality of teaching and learning
- further improving resources, particularly the availability and use of computers
- completing the changes in the management of the Skills for Life provision
- ensuring that specialist numeracy development, such as the sharing of good practice, is once more a regular feature of staff development.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop numeracy at the Walsall Adult and Community College.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter will be sent to the Skills Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Andy Harris
Her Majesty's Inspector