

Queen Alexandra College

Inspection report

Unique reference number:	131963
Name of lead inspector:	Deborah Vaughan-Jenkins HMI
Last day of inspection:	17 June 2011
Type of provider:	Independent Specialist College
Address:	Queen Alexandra College 49 Court Oak Road Harborne Birmingham B17 9TG
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Information about the provider

1. Queen Alexandra College (QAC) is an independent specialist residential college based in the suburbs of Birmingham. It provides education and training for learners predominantly with visual impairments. In recent years the college has enrolled more students with a range of other disabilities, in particular those with autistic spectrum disorders. The college’s major contracts are with the Young People’s Learning Agency (YPLA).

2. The college offers a range of vocational courses from pre-entry to advanced level. The college’s main subject areas are art and design, health and social care, hospitality, information technology, performing arts and preparation for life and work. The college has 33 learners enrolled on its Residential Training Unit (RTU) provision funded through the Department for Work and Pensions. This provision was not included in the scope of this inspection.

3. The college has residential accommodation for up to 110 learners on-site and within the community. Some 52 learners funded by the YPLA are currently resident at the college with 18 of these aged 16 to 18. Just over half of learners enrolled at the college are from the Birmingham area. Around 20% of learners are of minority ethnic heritage, slightly lower than that of the local population. The college’s mission is to ‘create challenging learning opportunities for people with visual impairment and/or other disabilities to realise their potential to work and to live independently’. A new principal was appointed in March 2010.

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
<p>Provision for young learners:</p> <p>Further education (16 to 18)</p> <p>Foundation learning</p>	<p>1 part-time learner 51 full-time learners</p> <p>1 part-time learner 72 full-time learners</p>
<p>Provision for adult learners:</p> <p>Further education (19+)</p>	<p>54 full-time learners</p>
<p>Adult and community learning</p>	<p>9 learners</p>

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 2
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Capacity to improve	Grade 2
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	Grade
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	2

Overall effectiveness

4. Queen Alexandra College provides a good quality education for its learners. Disabled learners with visual impairment and the increasing proportion of learners with complex autistic spectrum disorders achieve well in their time at the college, both academically and personally. Many make notable gains in their confidence and become increasingly self-directed in their learning and, particularly for residential learners, in their independent living. Learners like college a great deal and feel secure in its environment. They are encouraged actively to take on additional responsibilities and to get involved in activities, and many do, including participation in an array of external events. This, along with an increased range of vocational courses, provides realistic opportunities for learners to develop the skills they require to support their sustained future economic well-being. An extensive and varied enrichment programme, which includes opportunities for some learners to go sailing, adds to learners' enjoyment and contributes to effective team-working.
5. Learners demonstrate positive attitudes to learning and the majority make good progress in lessons as a result. In a minority of lessons, teachers' planning and their use of targeted objectives is less effective and this often prevents learners making as much progress as they are capable of. Carefully planned individual specialist support helps learners to understand and find strategies to manage their own disabilities and/or learning difficulties. Many learners gain the skills to travel more independently.
6. Managers, leaders and governors have been successful in focusing their priorities on listening to learners and ensuring that the majority of lessons are good or better in order to improve the learners' experience. Where provision has been carefully reviewed and monitored, it has improved markedly.

However, in a number of areas quality improvement arrangements and the use of data are less refined and evidence of impact is more difficult to determine.

Main findings

- Outcomes are good overall with high attainment on most main programmes. All learners follow nationally recognised qualifications. Although the college analyses the performance of different groups it is not always in enough detail. Many learners achieve high grades on accredited programmes.
- Most learners make good progress against their personal targets and develop more independent living and learning skills. The majority of learners who leave the college at the end of their course move successfully into further education, training or, in a number of cases, employment. Not all learners' progress, however, is effectively captured or recorded in lessons.
- Learners benefit greatly from the extensive range of opportunities available for them to get involved in the local community. Many volunteer their time to support local events and, as a result, develop good communication skills. Learners feel very safe and they develop good levels of self-confidence.
- Much teaching and learning is good. Most lessons are planned effectively to meet the assessed needs of individual learners. Resources, including assistive technologies, are used creatively to support learning. Learners participate frequently in lessons and enjoy their studies. In a minority of lessons planning is less effective and the pace of learners' progress is slowed as a result.
- The quality and use of learning targets to measure and assess learners' progress, particularly in lessons, varies too much. While it is good in many lessons, in others learners' targets are not clear enough or are too broad to capture small steps in learning or to provide sufficient detail for constructive evaluation and reflection by staff and learners.
- The curriculum is broad and offers a good array of accredited provision to meet the needs and interests of learners. More programmes are now available at advanced level to provide better internal progression between subjects. Enrichment opportunities are good. A greater number of related work experience placements are available for learners to extend their vocational skills.
- Care, guidance and support are good. Initial assessment is comprehensive and identifies clearly students' learning, health and therapeutic support needs. A wide range of support services are in place to support learners' physical and psychological well-being. Mobility provision is carefully managed and is highly effective in helping learners to access the wider community.
- Leadership and management are good and bring about change effectively. Several areas of the college's work, such as teaching and learning, have improved since the last inspection. Strategic planning has increased the focus on the needs and experiences of learners. Governors and managers are effective at setting and meeting targets for the college. Communication between staff is good.

- Safeguarding arrangements are good. Staff are trained appropriately on procedures to keep learners safe and links with external agencies are good. Risk assessments are thorough. Site security has improved in recent years and is good. Frequent work and training takes place with learners to help them keep safe, including e-safety.
- Equality of opportunity is promoted often and successfully through an array of events and initiatives to celebrate diversity. These, along with good and improving promotion of equalities through the curriculum, are effectively increasing learners' awareness and understanding of other cultures. Much equalities data is collected and reviewed, although this is not always undertaken or reported in enough detail.
- Many learners play an active role in the college in contributing suggestions and these are being used very effectively by the college to bring about improvement. Learners' proactive involvement through forums and in taking on roles such as student representatives or ambassadors has increased markedly. Formal engagement with other stakeholders, however, is less systematic.
- Quality assurance procedures are satisfactory. Some aspects of the college are monitored more rigorously than others. Inspectors' judgements aligned with most of the college's self-assessment report but the college's evaluation was overly positive in a few places. The quality improvement plan has clear actions to address issues but does not always evaluate their impact sufficiently.

What does Queen Alexandra College need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all aspects of the college's provision are monitored with the same degree of rigour, and that the quality improvement plan measures the progress made to address identified issues not just the actions taken. In addition, sharpen self-assessment reporting by using trend data better.
- Improve further the reporting of the performance of different groups by ensuring that: all reports are clearly presented and easy to interpret; all key groups are considered as part of the college's analysis; and trends in these data are reported clearly through self-assessment.
- Improve the planning in a minority of lessons and the quality, use and recording of learners' individual targets in several lessons by checking that learning objectives set in these are clear and that they effectively challenge all learners to make the progress they are capable of. Ensure that learners are fully involved in measuring their success in achieving these objectives.
- Improve engagement with other stakeholders and employers by introducing a more systematic approach to capturing their views to better inform the college's improvement planning and its self-assessment processes.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the friendly and safe environment
- opportunities to make new friends
- the specialist support they receive
- the approachable nature of staff
- being treated like an adult
- gaining more self-confidence.

What learners would like to see improved:

- more healthy food options, especially in the evening
- communication, especially about changes to timetables or events
- even more activities and trips
- the speed of the internet on some computers.

Summary of the views of stakeholders as confirmed by inspectors

What stakeholders like:

- the initial visit by college staff before learners start on work experience
- the good communications with the college
- the effective support in the workplace by mentors
- the skills and confidence gained by learners.

What stakeholders would like to see improved:

- the opportunity to express their views more formally.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

7. The college has successfully resolved the large majority of areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Financial management is now good and the college has invested significant resources to improve the quality of provision. Staff morale is high and they support the leadership team's drive for continuous improvement. Quality assurance arrangements are improving but while several key aspects are effective, a few aspects, including the measuring and reporting of the impact of actions taken by managers to improve, are less refined. The self-assessment report is largely accurate. The management team is being strengthened to ensure the college is up to date with best practice. The college is very responsive to changing needs and national priorities. Managers and staff listen intently to the views of learners and act upon them.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

8. All learners within the college now undertake accredited learning appropriate to their level and a very large majority achieve their qualifications successfully. On foundation and intermediate-level programmes achievement is very high and it is above average on advanced courses. A high proportion of learners gain merits and distinctions in their qualifications. Achievement in numeracy qualifications has improved over the last three years with all learners who took numeracy qualifications succeeding in 2009/10. Although literacy results were lower in 2009/10 they remain generally high. Attendance is good and indicates the enjoyment that learners gain from their studies. The standard of learners' work, particularly their practical work, is good.
9. Learners make good progress in their accredited qualifications and in their personal and social development. However, smaller steps of progress and achievement are not always captured or noted in enough detail to be meaningful. Learners make significant gains in their communication skills in their time at college and this increases their confidence and enables them to interact positively with others, including their peers. The majority of learners gain a range of independence skills related to everyday living and work preparation. The development of specific vocational skills and work experience for many learners prepares them very effectively for their next step after college. Around half of the learners who left the college after completing their studies in 2009/10 progressed successfully into further training or employment.
10. The college analyses the success rates of different groups of learners and, at headline level, college data show no significant variations in performance. The detail and clarity of reporting on different groups of learners, however, is insufficient. The detailed analysis of non-accredited achievement and the achievement of higher grades on accredited programmes is not yet systematically undertaken or reported.

11. The college provides a welcoming environment in which learners feel very safe. In most lessons, including practical workshops, learners demonstrate a good awareness of safe working practices. An expanding array of physical activities, including basketball, swimming and an on-site gymnasium promote fitness and the majority of learners participate in these. An increasing range of healthy food options are available, particularly through the day, to increase learners' choices. The college does not, however, evaluate, monitor or report the impact of learners' broader outcomes as effectively as it could. As a result, opportunities are missed to target improvement more effectively or to celebrate areas of particular success.
12. Opportunities for learners to make a positive contribution to the college and community are extensive and benefit learners' team-working and social skills greatly. The range of external events has increased notably in the last two years in conjunction with learners' participation in voluntary work and projects to support the local community, such as a popular summer fete and campaigns to promote World Sight Day. Sustainability projects, more recently introduced, include a learner focus group promoting green issues in college.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

13. The majority of lessons are planned well to motivate learners. Teachers make good use of information and learning technologies and appropriate adaptive technology to support learning and aid progress. Good resources are available for the different vocational subjects, such as in manufacturing operations and sports and recreation, and these help learners to develop good practical skills. In the very best lessons, tutors use sensitive and searching questioning and explanations to ensure that learners develop thinking skills. Individual strategies, learning targets and lesson objectives are sharply focused on the differing needs of learners. In these lessons, progress is reviewed constructively, with negotiated comments from learners themselves about how targets have been achieved. In a minority of lessons however, learners' subject-specific and personal targets are unclear or far too broad, particularly, but not exclusively, when different levels are taught together. As a result, the pace of learning is reduced, not all learners are sufficiently challenged to maximise their progress in the lesson time, and often small steps in their learning and knowledge are not recorded.
14. A good range of programmes meets the needs and interests of learners and provides a wide array of opportunities for them to learn through hands-on practical tasks that engage them. The curriculum has been further expanded to offer more courses at advanced level and increase the number of work-related placements. Enterprise projects and the college's own commercial ventures, which include a high street retail outlet for professional racing bicycles, provide very good opportunities for learners to develop their skills for employment. A good range of enrichment opportunities exists, including athletics, goalball, line-dancing, a film club and men's and women's groups, and learners' participation in these is high. Extra-curricular activities are an integral part of the learners'

timetables and are accessible to residential and non-residential learners. The college makes effective use of local partnerships to increase access for learners to a wider curriculum and to build sustainable long-term support for transition.

15. The provision for accredited literacy and numeracy is good overall. However, individual learners' targets for literacy and numeracy, although identified, are not always emphasised enough within a minority of subject-specific lessons to help reinforce prior learning or to assist the transferability of these skills into different 'real life' contexts.
16. Care, guidance and support are good. Learners benefit from an in-depth initial assessment which clearly identifies their learning, health and therapeutic support needs. The ratio of highly-skilled support staff to learners in lessons is very high. This support is reviewed frequently and as learners become more independent, the level of support is gradually reduced. Counselling and mentoring support are very good and are integrated into learners' timetables. As a result, many learners gain good self-awareness of their visual impairment and/or disability and others successfully develop strategies to manage their own behaviour. Mobility provision is very effective in enabling learners to access the wider community. The college's self-assessment report accurately identifies the need for a sensory room and increased access to therapeutic massage. Plans are in place to incorporate these into a new college building due to open in October 2011.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

17. Strong direction from the senior team ensures that the quality of the learners' experience is increasingly at the heart of everything the college does. A developing culture of high expectations, coupled with clearer lines of accountability, has led to improvements in many areas since the last inspection, notably in the quality of teaching and learning. Strategic planning is focused more acutely on the needs of learners, and national priorities. The senior management team is being strengthened in terms of its range of experience and expertise; some appointments are recent and it is too early to see their full impact.
18. Governors are actively involved in setting the strategic direction of the college. They carry out regular skills audits and have recruited new members with specific expertise in line with clearly identified priorities. The governing body provides a good balance of support and challenge to senior managers. It monitors the college's performance frequently, although some of the formal reports to governors lack sufficient detail. Governors have a good understanding of their statutory responsibilities and undertake appropriate training to help them carry out their roles.
19. Safeguarding arrangements are good. Arrangements to recruit new staff are in line with good practice, and procedures for checks on volunteers and contracted services are effective. Training for staff and governors is regular and up to date. Safeguarding is a standing item at key meetings, including the

Principal's meetings with the student forum. Risk assessments and incident reporting are thorough and effective links exist with external agencies, including social services. Significant work takes place with students to raise their safety awareness, such as training on cyber bullying and 'stranger danger'.

20. User engagement is good overall. Learner involvement is very good. A wide array of opportunities exists for learners to contribute their views and ideas, including through specific focus groups, frequent surveys, and through student representatives. For example, suggestions from learners have led to a number of improvements to the college campus. Student representatives give frequent presentations to the governing body about topical events. The student ambassadors, who represent the college to external visitors at open evenings and external events, are excellent role models for other learners. Engagement with other users such as the providers of work placements and other stakeholders is not as well developed.
21. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. An increased range of varied events has helped raised learners' and staff awareness of wider equality themes. Visits to local mosques and temples, for example, are helping learners to gain a much greater appreciation of other cultures. The promotion of equalities through the curriculum is mostly good. The celebration of diversity through assignments and project work is very good. The single equality scheme and plan is in place and has been recently revised to focus more directly the college's key strategic priorities. The vast majority of staff and governors have received appropriate training and several have attended additional specific training, for example in mental health awareness. The college collates a wide range of data including learners' destinations and review this by different learner groups. Not all the analysis or reporting of equalities is as detailed as it could be. In addition, data are not always presented in a format that is easy to understand or enables the college to target specifically enough for further improvement or celebrate what is working well.
22. Quality assurance procedures are improving but are satisfactory overall. The college system for monitoring and improving the quality of lessons is effective and has increased the proportion of good or better lessons. The monitoring of tutorials however is less rigorous. The quality improvement plan records actions that have been taken to improve provision, but is not always clear about their impact. Staff are more involved in self-assessment than in previous years and further training is planned to develop their skills in evaluating the areas of work they are responsible for. Inspectors were in broad agreement with the college's self-assessment report, although some strengths were over-stated and in parts it described provision rather than focusing on its effectiveness. Work is under way to further improve the use of the college's management information system in the provision of data to support effective self-assessment.
23. The college campus is maintained to a high standard and is welcoming. The college has invested notably in improving the resources available to support learning, including specialist assistive technologies. The promotion of sustainability is gaining an increasingly high profile within the college.

Outcomes for learners have remained good. Financial management is robust. Consequently, the college provides good value for money.

Information about the inspection

24. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by the college's senior learning manager as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the funding body, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality monitoring inspection, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
25. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners and stakeholders. They also looked at questionnaires learners and stakeholders had recently completed for the college. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)
Queen Alexandra College

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	16-18 Learner responsive	19+ Learner responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners			
Full-time learners	117	55	62
Part-time learners	0	0	0
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2
Capacity to improve	2		
Outcomes for learners	2	2	2
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2		
How well do learners attain their learning goals? How well do learners progress?	2 2		
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2		
How safe do learners feel?	2		
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	2		
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	1		
Quality of provision	2		
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2		
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2		
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2		
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2		
Leadership and management	2		
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2		
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	2		
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2		
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2		
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2		
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3		
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2		

*where applicable to the type of provision

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