

Activate Learning

General further education college

Inspection dates		9–13 December 2013
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Good-2
Outcomes for learners		Requires improvement-3
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Good-2

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is good because:

- Provision in independent learning and leisure skills, and hospitality and catering, is outstanding.
- Strong leadership and governors provide outstanding leadership challenge and support to the colleges.
- Learners make good progress and develop valuable employability skills in a safe, welcoming environment.
- Learners participate fully in the life of the colleges, develop good communication skills and collaborate well with each other.
- Staff have well-developed and productive links with employers and other organisations which lead to learners gaining good entrepreneurial skills.
- Learners increasingly influence improvements to the colleges.
- Managers and staff have implemented an effective approach to improving teaching and learning, which is supported by well-planned professional training and development.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- Outcomes for learners are not yet good enough in almost all areas, especially in apprenticeships and engineering.
- Teaching and learning require further improvement in functional skills English and mathematics, engineering and apprenticeships.
- Outcomes from lesson observations do not always lead to robust action plans that are reviewed through appraisals.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of apprentices who are successful by:
 - making sure that assessment is regular and that learners' progress is monitored more closely
 - teaching and assessing functional skills earlier in learners' programmes
 - providing learners with easier access to information about their progress.
- Further improve teaching and learning by making sure that managers clearly identify the skills and training that teachers need to continue to improve their practice, and link lesson observation outcomes to appraisals.
- Increase the proportion of learners who successfully complete English and mathematics qualifications by:
 - making sure that all staff understand the importance of functional skills
 - improving learners' attendance at functional skills lessons
 - planning lessons to challenge learners of all abilities.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outcomes for learners require improvement. The proportion of learners successfully completing their programmes has improved over the past three years and was, in 2012/13, just above the national average. Outcomes for learners on long intermediate programmes, excluding GCSE courses, were above average, as were those for learners on programmes for independent living, a number of hospitality and catering courses, and for furniture-making learners. ▪ Achievement rates for apprentices on work-based learning programmes declined in 2012/13 and were well below national averages. However, the proportion of apprentices aged 16 to 18 successfully completing their programmes by the due date was much better than that of their adult peers. ▪ Many of the adult apprentices successfully completed National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) certificates, but did not gain the full qualification because they did not achieve the functional skills English and mathematics qualifications. Managers and trainers are well aware of this and plans have been put in place to improve the quality of functional skills teaching for the learners. ▪ Learners' achievements have improved at much the same rate as the national average. However, fewer learners have withdrawn from, or changed, their courses so far in 2013/14 when compared to the same period in the previous year. ▪ Teachers and managers now put more emphasis on making sure that learners are guided into appropriate intermediate functional skills and GCSE additional qualifications. Learners' pass rates at grades A* to C for GCSE mathematics and English improved in 2012/13 and are now above the national average, although this national rate is deemed to be a low one. ▪ Outcomes for learners on functional skills English, mathematics and information and communication technology programmes in 2012/13 were below national averages. College data suggest that, in 2013/14, learners are making better progress. ▪ Learners' attendance has improved in most subject areas and is broadly satisfactory. However, attendance at English and mathematics functional skills lessons was considerably lower than the colleges' average during the inspection week. ▪ Learners enjoy their studies and training and work conscientiously in groups, collaborating well with each other and developing relevant personal, social and vocational skills. In addition, they 	

develop good employability skills through a wide variety of work experience placements, workplace training and a range of other vocationally relevant activities.

- Many learners use their qualification successes and well-developed vocational skills to progress to further study or employment. The proportion of learners progressing to further study within the colleges has improved.
- Outcomes for learners from minority ethnic backgrounds in 2012/13 were broadly in line with those of the rest of the student body. The attainment rates of female learners were slightly higher than those of their male counterparts. Learners who receive additional learning support and those who identify themselves as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities attain at or above the level of their peers.
- A small number of school pupils take part-time vocational courses at the colleges each year. They enjoy their studies, attend well and their pass rates are good. A high proportion of these pupils then go on to further study at the colleges.
- Learners are actively engaged in a wide variety of skills competitions each year and recently some have gained national and international successes. Many learners take part in raising money for national charities each year. Learners, teachers and support staff work safely in laboratories, workshops and studios.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
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- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, which is leading to improved outcomes for most learners. Most lessons are good and a significant minority, particularly in independent living and leisure skills, and in catering, are outstanding. However, a minority of lessons in functional skills English and mathematics, and apprenticeships, are not yet good enough to secure good outcomes for learners.
- Teachers motivate learners well through a wide variety of activities which develop learners' independence and successfully extend their knowledge, skills and understanding. Most classrooms and workshops buzz with activity as learners develop their knowledge and communication skills in well-planned discussions. Teachers ensure that learners work well together and learn from each other. For example, in a foundation-level business studies lesson, one learner typed a summary of the discussion as it happened. He immediately shared this document with others electronically so that all had a copy to annotate.
- Opportunities for teachers to take part in professional development are plentiful and varied. Much professional development is innovative and makes good use of web technologies to allow teachers to learn at a time that suits them, or collaboratively with colleagues. Staff increase the range of teaching strategies they use with learners by learning from each other. For example, on a 'Green Door' day, teachers hang a green sign on their classroom door to indicate to colleagues that they may come in to observe the lesson.
- Teachers plan their lessons well and many ensure that learners understand how activities link to previous learning and what they need to achieve today. In a small number of lessons teachers do not sufficiently challenge learners to improve. Teachers monitor learners' progress through most lessons well and assess them regularly. However, some apprentices have to wait too long before their mathematics and English skills are assessed and, in addition, they are not challenged sufficiently to make rapid progress through their qualifications.
- Teachers plan innovative activities that develop learners' entrepreneurial and employability skills well. Many vocational areas have set up 'Learning Companies' through which students develop vocational skills. A very high number of learners are gaining valuable entrepreneurial and employability skills through these. For example, learners on courses in independent living and leisure skills run a shop at two colleges, and public service students run a weekend car parking project.
- Most curriculum teams collaborate well with employers to provide work experience for learners or guidance on the skills they want the college to teach. For example, in a Reading local care

home, managers help teachers plan the courses and other employers advise on the units to be taught in hospitality and public services.

- Information technology (IT) resources are plentiful and exceptionally well used in many curriculum areas. A small, but growing, number of course teams, particularly at Reading, are using web technologies to encourage learners to share documents, ideas and resources with their teachers and each other. This leads to learners having good discussions online and quickly sharing recent and relevant resources they have found or created. Learners enjoy this and many take greater responsibility for their own learning by completing activities, formulating ideas and carrying out research outside lessons. However, trainers and assessors make insufficient use of IT to help apprentices make better progress.
- Teachers’ feedback following assessment successfully informs learners how well they have completed work. However, in too many courses, including apprenticeships, teachers do not give learners clear guidance on how they can improve the quality of their work.
- Learners’ development in English and mathematics varies considerably across the subject areas. In the best areas, such as hospitality and independent living and leisure skills, English and mathematics are taught skilfully. However, in other vocational areas a minority of lessons are not well enough planned and teachers do not check learning with sufficient diligence.
- Staff have created a culture of mutual respect in each college and learners value the welcoming college environment. Many teachers promote diversity through carefully chosen projects and references to topical events. Displays and video screens around each college promote the benefits of belonging to a diverse community.

Early years	Good
16-19 study programmes	
19+ Learning programmes	

- Teaching, learning and assessment in early years and playwork are good. This is reflected in improved retention rates overall, and in success rates on many courses which were above national averages in 2012/13.
- Learners are successful in progressing to higher-level courses and employment. Learners develop effective employability skills by taking part in good quality work placements which enable them to put theory into practice in commercial contexts. Managers and teachers support this by developing excellent relationships with local employers to ensure learners develop the skills and knowledge required to work in the childcare sector.
- Teachers have high expectations of learners and are successful in supporting learners’ additional and personal welfare needs. Learners benefit from teachers’ excellent and current standards of industry experience. They also play a role in recruiting new staff into the departments, which helps them develop higher order skills and confidence.
- A minority of teachers use technology very well to enhance learning; for example, a group of learners at Reading are currently producing a short video on transitions in childhood. Plans are well advanced to present this at an open evening and staff will use it to assess technological and presentation skills.
- In order to identify personal support needs and additional learning needs learners receive good initial assessments at the start of their programmes. Apprentices receive initial assessment using an electronic system that they can also use to help them develop their knowledge and understanding, and to prepare for examinations.
- Assessment of learners’ knowledge in class, work placements and through assignments varies in quality. Teachers return marked work promptly, but do not consistently give learners enough written feedback to help them to improve their work and achieve higher grades. Most teachers use directed questions well in class and in workplace observations to check learners’ understanding of underpinning theory and current childcare practice.

- Learners develop good written English and discussion skills. They learn the spelling and meanings of relevant early years terminology, and begin to use the terms confidently. Most learners take pride in their work and develop good communication, speaking and listening skills, which are all very important when working with children and families. However, teachers do not routinely use available opportunities to develop learners' mathematical skills in vocational lessons.
- Learners receive good information, advice and guidance from appropriately qualified staff when they start their programmes. This ensures that they are on the right course from the start and that they are progressing and achieving the relevant qualifications and experience to support their future career aspirations.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion are well promoted in lessons and work settings and are reflected well in learning environments. For example, one group of advanced learners developed a useful and informative activity for children in childcare settings to celebrate the colourful Hindu festival of Holi which marks the coming of spring. However, not all teachers are equally confident in helping learners understand diversity so that they themselves may develop confidence in dealing with different community groups.

Motor vehicle

16-19 study programmes
19+ Learning programmes
Apprenticeships

Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment require improvement. This is reflected in success rates, especially for apprentices, which were below the average rate among similar providers in 2012/13.
- Teachers are well qualified and plan their lessons carefully to make sure that learners understand important ideas and practical procedures that prepare them for work in commercial settings. They set learners a variety of relevant and interesting tasks, make particularly effective use of resources, including technology, and provide extension activities to inspire and engage learners.
- However, in a significant minority of lessons, the pace of work is slow, teachers talk for too long and classroom tasks and activities are not always sufficiently challenging for the more able learners. As a result, a minority of learners in these lessons do not progress well.
- In the best practical sessions in the workshops, learners develop good technical skills, use accurate terminology and demonstrate good communication, both verbally and in writing. In these sessions, learners work productively on realistic engineering tasks, such as accurately undertaking Ministry of Transport checks and diagnosing electrical faults.
- Teachers and managers have developed very productive links with local motor vehicle enterprises. Learners, at all levels of study, benefit from visits to local garages and parts suppliers. Most significantly, local companies have helped the departments to provide a good range of modern cars for learners to work on. As a result, learners qualify with good up-to-date experience of modern cars and vans and the ability to diagnose faults electronically.
- Resources for learning are good, reflect those used in the workplace and most vehicles are replaced annually. Tools are well maintained and workshops are tidy and safe places to work in. The new facilities at Banbury provide good, realistic work environments.
- Learners have good access to information technology in classrooms and most use these facilities well to research information for assignments and to develop independent learning. Most teachers provide good written and verbal feedback to learners to help them improve the standard of their work. However, in a minority of cases the feedback is insufficiently evaluative, does not always identify the range of practical skills which learners have demonstrated or outline clearly enough how learners might improve their work.

- Most learners make progress and develop skills appropriate for the level of programme they are taking. The encouragement they receive from staff helps them to make a smooth and successful transition from secondary school to further education technical training. However, assessors in the workplace do not always help the most able apprentices make swift enough progress.
- Teachers and trainers do not give enough importance to the development of learners' English and mathematics. Learners' attendance at functional skills lessons is poor. A minority of learners have never attended. In addition, teachers do not always correct learners' grammatical and spelling errors.
- Apprentices benefit from regular assessments in the workplace. However, some assessments focus too narrowly on meeting the requirements of the qualifications and opportunities to recognise wider skills development are missed. Assessors make insufficient use of the results of initial assessments and many do not identify targets to enable learners to progress.
- Learners speak highly of the welcoming college environment and feel safe in the college and in the workplace. Learners understand the importance of health and safety and relate this effectively to their roles in the workplace. Teachers' lesson plans and schemes of work have limited plans for promoting equality and diversity. Learners demonstrate only limited understanding of the relevance of equality and diversity in the workplace.

Hospitality and catering

16-19 study programmes
19+ Learning programmes
Apprenticeships

Outstanding

- Teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding. Consequently, learners develop excellent standards of technical skills with high success rates for full-time students. However, success rates for adult apprentices require improvement.
- College learners work particularly well in mixed ability teams, sharing their knowledge and practical skills in challenging environments. They produce a wide variety of dishes and desserts to suit customers' requirements, with emphasis on excellent presentation and well-balanced flavours. All full-time students complete work experience in a range of food outlets in and out of college.
- Advanced level college students on duty in the restaurants work exceptionally well with learners in the kitchen to ensure a smooth service. They closely monitor production in readiness for service, check standards and give clear advice to students in their team. This is supplemented by sensitive individual support from the teachers.
- Teachers plan very good practical work for learners in the kitchens. The learners are fully engaged and benefit from exceptional support from their teachers and assessors. Assessment practice is excellent and learners have a good understanding of what they have achieved and what they need to do to complete their qualifications.
- Full-time learners who complete their assessments early are challenged to try new dishes to develop their skills further. On apprenticeship programmes, learners are offered additional specialist units to extend their skills. However, apprentices do not always benefit from off-the-job training that extends their knowledge and understanding.
- Teachers and assessors are inspiring role models and challenge learners to achieve the highest standards. Apprentices are well supported in the workplace by their colleagues and employers, enabling them to develop personally as well as professionally. College students attend world skills events to showcase their highly developed confectionery skills, such as chocolate handbags and sugar flowers.
- Staff provide very good support for learners. Individual learning needs are quickly identified and support put in place. Learners receive support until they have sufficiently developed their

reading and writing skills and have the confidence and ability to work independently. This has been very effective in ensuring learners stay on their courses and achieve their qualifications.

- Learners develop good communication skills in the restaurants and deal with clients in a very professional manner. Teachers use initial assessment results effectively to provide learners with appropriate functional skills programmes to develop their English and mathematics. Learners at Oxford benefit from well-planned English and mathematics support in vocational contexts.
- Teachers monitor learners' progress rigorously, with a thoughtful focus on progress towards unit and full qualification achievement. They regularly check learners' completion of their targets and negotiate and set new targets with learners to ensure rapid progress. However, the targets are occasionally too general and insufficiently specific.
- Advice and guidance are good in hospitality and catering. Teachers provide very good advice to learners on employment opportunities in the catering and hospitality industry. Staff successfully adapt apprenticeship programmes to meet employers' requirements. Employers appreciate the flexibility of apprenticeship programmes and the relevant skills that the learners develop.
- Learners develop a good understanding of diversity through catering for a wide variety of ethnic groups and by meeting individual dietary requirements. Learners demonstrate respect for each other and their work colleagues.

Visual arts

16-19 study programmes 19+ Learning programmes

Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment in visual arts are good. This is reflected in improved outcomes for most courses, which in 2012/13 were at or above national averages.
- Many learners make better progress than expected from their prior attainment. An increasing proportion of learners achieve high grades at the end of their courses. Learners become confident in their understanding of the creative process and use good technical skills to develop ideas further.
- In most lessons, teachers use interesting and relevant activities that encourage learners to work and discuss in groups and also develop independence. The pace of lessons is fast and teachers seize opportunities to check the learning of students and reinforce knowledge. Teachers manage the transition between directed and independent learning well.
- Teachers plan lessons carefully, informed by priorities identified in course improvement plans. They explain theoretical principles well and emphasise their importance to learners' practical work. However, in a minority of lessons, teachers do not always explain important underpinning contextual references. Consequently, opportunities for learners to fully develop and exploit challenging and insightful ideas are lost.
- Learners use a wide range of techniques in craft, as well as in design and visualisation. They develop good practical and digital skills. However, the teaching of drawing varies between the colleges. Where learners make most progress, drawings are more ambitious in scale and learners experiment with mark making, which increases the level of confidence by which they can communicate ideas visually.
- Teachers provide highly focused and constructive verbal feedback to learners during lessons. In the better examples of written feedback, teachers explain clearly to learners the theory and conceptual understanding they must apply with practical skills to their work. In a minority of cases, teachers do not give consistent detailed advice to enable learners to develop work and improve their grades.
- Studios are spacious and well equipped. A new creative arts centre has recently been built at Banbury, providing a stimulating and exciting environment in which to learn. Learners make good use of specialist facilities including ceramics, printmaking and three-dimensional

workshops. Extensive digital and media resources are also well used by learners. Work by learners and staff is displayed in studios and corridors across the colleges and used in lessons to inspire learning. A gallery at each college exhibits work of guest artists or designers, linking students to the professional world.

- Learners benefit from visits which enrich their education. For example, learners at Banbury visited museums in Venice to extend their historical understanding and learners at Reading enjoyed working from observation during a visit to the RHS gardens at Wisley. Teachers use their extensive contacts with the creative industries to develop the vocational and enterprise skills of learners and regular visits from university staff help learners prepare to move on.
- Learners take part in detailed critiques and discussions in many lessons. They listen carefully to each other and begin to develop their verbal and critical analysis. They incorporate evaluative and analytical annotation in sketchbooks and journals. Learners calculate scales, ratios and proportion in drawing and making activities. Those using film and media plan and organise their time effectively.
- The promotion of equality and diversity within the curriculum is excellent. All courses engage students with a diverse range of cultural and creative influences which expand their understanding of difference. For example, in one lesson at Oxford, photography learners evaluated the socio-political impact on gender equality in the late twentieth century of the French feminist performance artist ORLAN.

Foundation English and mathematics

16-19 study programmes

19+ Learning programmes

Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment in foundation English and mathematics require improvement in order to raise the low success rates in 2012/13. Whilst teachers and managers are implementing strategies that are leading to improvements in classroom practice, it is too early to see the impact on outcomes for learners. Learners' attendance was poor during the inspection week.
- Most teachers structure their lessons well and use good resources to support learning. They plan activities that are varied and interesting and enable learners to practise their mathematical operations and speaking and writing skills. They also include useful extension activities to provide further stimulus to learners.
- In the majority of lessons, learners are very focused and motivated to learn and improve. In mathematics lessons, learners apply a range of concepts such as percentages, measuring, using formulae and handling data. Most lessons provide appropriate activities and include interesting and enjoyable elements, such as the use of domino games to practise solving simple equations.
- Learners demonstrate improved English and they express themselves clearly. For example, a 'Mystery Article' activity in functional skills English enabled learners to practise using persuasive language. English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) learners develop confidence in speaking and improved vocabulary. Learners develop useful employability skills, such as carrying out research and problem solving.
- However, in a minority of lessons teachers talk for too long, learners are passive and, as a result, learning is limited. In these lessons teachers do not manage the learning effectively and when classroom management is not robust some learners distract one another. In addition, the activities do not always meet the full range of abilities and some find the work too easy, whilst others struggle to keep up.
- Support for learning is good. Teaching assistants provide effective support which enables all learners to participate and learn. However, the assessment and checking of learning is inconsistent. In the majority of lessons teachers use a variety of approaches to check individual

learning, including the use of mini whiteboards and online quizzes. In the best lessons, teachers provide constructive and developmental feedback, both in class and on marked work.

- Where learners make least progress, teachers do not check learning sufficiently, their use of questioning is limited and they sometimes answer their own questions. In a minority of cases, learners had no marked work or the marked work consisted simply of ticks and crosses. Teachers do not always monitor or record the progress that learners have made.
- Teachers use initial assessment results effectively to establish the appropriate level of study and the colleges provide good opportunities for learners to study to GCSE English and mathematics. However, in a very small number of cases learners are not placed on the right level of course quickly enough.
- Teachers promote equality and diversity effectively in many English lessons. They make effective use of topical events; for example, learners analysed a speech by President Obama to investigate persuasive techniques. In a basic skills lesson, learners increased their vocabulary by discussing if it is polite to criticise someone's cooking in other cultures. Learners also used their own experience to compare Christmas and Eid celebrations.

Independent living and leisure skills

16-19 study programmes

19+ Learning programmes

Outstanding

- Teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding in independent living and leisure skills. This is reflected in the high success rates that learners achieve in their functional skills awards in English, mathematics and ICT, and in their employment-related activities. Skilled and accurate assessment and precise target setting also contribute to the excellent progress that learners make in achieving their personal, social and employability goals.
- Learners are successful in extending their spoken English skills. They speak with confidence when addressing adults who may be unfamiliar to them. Most learners share their feelings and express emotion without embarrassment or fear. In a drama lesson, for example, two learners constructed the following dialogue. 'I use my ego to hide my true self.' 'What like a mask?', came the reply. 'To a degree', agreed the first speaker.
- When working collaboratively, most learners understand and use conversation sensibly, listen to each other carefully and cooperate to achieve a consensus. They know, understand and use the technical vocabulary related to their lessons accurately. Learners' numeracy skills are effectively developed in practical sessions. For example, in a cookery lesson students were given the necessary support to be able to double quantities of ingredients quickly and accurately.
- Learners make outstanding progress in their preparedness for the world of work through teachers' skilful use of realistic employment frameworks within the curriculum. In one class, learners were able to explain the complicated organisational structures that existed in their work placements. They show excellent customer service skills when on duty in one of the many successful retail outlets across the colleges.
- A substantial number of entry-level learners are able to progress onto foundation courses within the college. Two thirds of learners who take part in the entry-level employability programmes progress onto a mainstream vocational course, and a further 12% were accepted last year as interns at the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Very few learners leave the department's provision without progressing into a placement that furthers their own aspirations.
- Teachers prepare their lessons in detail, taking full account of the prior learning and the strengths of individual learners. Planning for learning ensures that learners play an active role at all stages of the lessons. Teachers have high expectations of their learners and learners also have realistic expectations of themselves.
- Teachers are very well qualified with extensive and relevant experience. Teachers know their learners well. In most lessons they set the information gained from initial and diagnostic

assessment, as well as interviews alongside their careful observation of their learners, to identify and plan how they will meet learners' individual needs during lessons. Teachers know how individuals engage with learning tasks most effectively, and in the best classes they personalise activities so that all learners can complete tasks successfully.

- Teachers assess learners' starting points accurately. Teachers use a good range of initial, diagnostic strategies that ensure learners enter the college at the right level. In most classes, teachers set their learners challenging targets with learner achievements tracked carefully during lessons. Many learners are aware of their targets and can make their own assessment of the progress they make. Learners make good use of regular opportunities to update their targets through the electronic 'Live Review'.
- The provision of work experience is outstanding. Learners benefit from the wide variety of nearly 350 work placements secured by the college. Nearly half of the learners across the group have a work experience placement and most of these are for two days a week throughout the year. These placements are effectively supported by specialist staff and job coaches. An outstanding partnership project at Reading with a local school and the Royal Berkshire Hospital successfully creates a one-year intern programme for eight learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In 2012–13, seven of the eight learners went on to gain employment after following the hospital's normal recruitment procedures. However, this good practice is not fully appreciated across the other colleges.
- The college provides outstanding support for learners inside and outside the classroom. Learning support assistants (LSA) are knowledgeable and receive training to meet the various needs of learners. The effectively planned and allocated support enables learners who might present as fragile or socially isolated to become active members of their groups. Learners feel safe across the campuses. They are confident in making their views known and play an active role in the student council. They are keen advocates for the department and play a very visible role in college life.
- Managers and teachers work effectively with a very varied group of partners to provide courses that meet a wide range of learner needs. Lengthy collaboration with Reading Borough Council has resulted in the construction of a purpose-built centre for students on the autistic spectrum. The promotion of equality in lessons is good. In one class, for example, learners were able to discuss barriers to employment and how those might affect learners with varying physical and intellectual needs. Learners show an awareness of the needs of others and one small group had recently raised £200 as part of the 'Movember' initiative by having their legs waxed.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The chief executive officer (CEO) and senior leaders have managed the transition to the group's new structure with considerable skill. They undertook this as part of an ambitious and thoughtfully considered vision for the future of the group, with a keen eye on meeting the current needs of students, local industries and communities, and anticipating the future skills needs within Oxfordshire, Berkshire and the wider economy. The CEO's and governors' vision for, and commitment to, improving the job chances of young people extends to developing provision through highly effective collaboration with local partners in establishing two University Technical Colleges.
- It is much to the credit of the governors, CEO and senior leaders that, during a period of considerable organisational change, managers and staff have presided over a steady rise in students' outcomes, whilst also securing a stable financial position. Prudent management of college resources and assets has resulted in senior managers bringing about well-planned improvements to the group's estate across its three colleges.
- Governance is outstanding. Governors use their extensive and wide-ranging skills expertly to support senior managers to realise their vision for the group. The CEO and senior leaders provide governors with an accurate overview of all aspects of the group's performance and they,

in turn, provide rigorous challenge to managers with regard to key strategic developments. Governors have a strong interest in teaching, learning and assessment and have been instrumental in working with managers to implement improvements, such as curriculum development and the introduction of a peer observation scheme.

- Managers have taken very effective steps to narrow the achievement gaps between different groups of students. They use data well to monitor students' performance and identify areas for improvement quickly. For example, managers worked closely with community groups to understand young people's barriers to learning, and implemented actions to overcome them. Staff have imbued the colleges with a culture of respect and tolerance for others and many initiatives are in place to promote students' awareness of social and cultural diversity.
- Managers' involvement of students in promoting equality is excellent. For example, the managers have supported members of the student council to undertake equality impact assessments on college policies. Managers have subsequently made amendments to policies based on feedback from students, so that they better meet the needs of the whole student population.
- The CEO and senior leaders promote a culture of high expectations and encourage innovation and experimentation among staff, which are having an impact on improving students' learning. Through lesson observations managers evaluate teachers' strengths and areas for improvement well, but do not yet identify clearly enough the specific skills that teachers need to develop to improve students' performance further. Managers recognise that the extent to which they link the outcomes from observations to staff appraisals and personal development plans needs further improvement.
- Self-assessment is good. Managers and staff accurately evaluate the provision at group and college levels, and within curriculum areas and support departments. Staff at all levels regularly review progress in the implementation of quality improvement plans. However, the extent to which they identify the actions they need to take to develop their skills is variable, and in a minority of cases lacks precision. Managers make good use of feedback from students and employers to ensure that the courses offered help students gain jobs.
- Managers correctly identify the need to improve the outcomes for students on apprenticeship programmes and functional skills qualifications. They have made considerable improvements to these areas in the current academic year by revising the management of apprenticeships, altering the schedule of teaching of English and mathematics within apprenticeship programmes, and implementing effective staff training. At the time of the inspection it is too early to see the impact of these actions on students' achievements.
- Links with employers and local agencies are excellent and used to very good effect to raise students' proficiency so that the students are ready for employment. Managers have adeptly modified courses to meet the new study programme requirements, with six week cycles of learning that include one week of projects to enhance students' enterprise skills. Employers provide a substantial input into this aspect of students' progress at all levels of learning.
- Managers have successfully developed the curriculum to provide access to learning that meets the needs of a wide range of students. Managers work closely with schools and local authorities to bring young people who are not in education, employment or training back into learning.
- Staff promote safety and well-being effectively and the group meets its legislative requirements for safeguarding students. Managers have good links with local agencies in order to be aware of emerging safeguarding issues and they train governors, staff and students accordingly. Teachers and assessors pay due attention to health and safety in classrooms, workshops and in the workplace, and students feel safe.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Activate Learning

<p>Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance:</p> <p>1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate</p>	Overall	14-16 part-time provision	16-19 study programmes	19+ Learning programmes	Apprenticeships
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2	2	3
Outcomes for learners	3	2	3	3	3
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	2	2	2	3
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	2	2	2	2

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Early years and playwork	2
Motor vehicle	3
Hospitality and catering	1
Visual arts	2
Foundation English and mathematics	3
Independent living and leisure skills	1

Provider details

Type of provider	General further education college							
Age range of learners	16 – 19 and adult learners							
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	Full-time: 5670							
	Part-time: 14394							
Principal/CEO	Ms Sally Dicketts							
Date of previous inspection	October 2008							
Website address	activatelearning.ac.uk							
Provider information at the time of the inspection								
Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Full-time	2232	628	1226	516	1843	523	-	2
Part-time	85	934	109	938	26	217	4	16
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	-		-		-			
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	338	415	201	858	-	40		
Number of learners aged 14-16								
Full-time	N/A							
Part-time	288							
Number of community learners	173							
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency, Skills Funding Agency, European Social Fund							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aspire Achieve Advance Ltd ■ Chiltern Training Ltd ■ Ignite Sports ■ Learning Curve (JAA) Ltd ■ Liga (UK) Ltd ■ Oxfordshire County Council ■ TWIN Training International Ltd ■ Waste Management Assessment Services Ltd ■ Wycombe District Council 							

Contextual information

Activate Learning group was formed in September 2013, following the merger of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College, and Reading College in 2010. The group comprises Banbury and Bicester College, City of Oxford College, Reading College and Activate Enterprise. Activate Learning has a chief executive officer; each college has a principal and Activate Enterprise a director. In 2012/13 the three colleges recruited around 14,500 learners, two thirds of whom were adults on part-time courses. Most learners, currently, are on foundation and intermediate programmes and the group have around 1,800 apprentices in five subject areas. Oxfordshire and Berkshire are affluent counties with rates of unemployment below national averages. However, across both counties, there are areas of educational and social deprivation and the profile of learners attending the colleges reflects this. GCSE attainment in local secondary schools is broadly at, or just below, national averages, and many learners come to study and train at the colleges with attainment below national averages. The proportion of the population of Oxfordshire and Berkshire from minority ethnic backgrounds varies from around 25% in Reading to below 5% in Banbury and Bicester. However, the proportion of learners from minority ethnic backgrounds in the colleges matches or exceeds these local proportions.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Alex Falconer HMI

Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and nine additional inspectors, assisted by the executive director curriculum, standards and academies as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements over the last three years to help them make judgements. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected throughout the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all of the provision at the provider. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision and graded the sector subject areas listed in the report above.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills 2012*, Part 2:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/handbook-for-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-september-2012>

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