

Hillcroft College

Specialist designated institution

Inspection dates		28–31 January 2014
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Inadequate-4
Outcomes for learners		Good-2
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:

- On the very large majority of courses leading to a qualification, the proportion of students completing successfully has improved progressively and substantially over the past three years, and is now a close match to national rates, which are high. This improvement has continued in the academic year to date.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are good. Teachers have high expectations of students and students respond very well to the challenge. Students learn at a good rate in most lessons. Most students are making significant progress relative to their starting points.
- Students receive excellent personal and academic support. Teachers' feedback to students is carefully considered and developmental. Appropriate and timely information, advice and guidance support learning very effectively.
- The college has taken decisive and effective actions to improve all of its provision including highly extensive changes to the management structure, revisions to the curriculum and very well-structured and effective methods for improving teaching, learning and assessment.
- A very good range of reliable and timely data on students' attendance, retention, progress and success rates is now used very well by governors, senior managers and teaching staff for information and performance monitoring purposes.
- Self-assessment is thorough and insightful. Corresponding quality improvement action planning is similarly thorough and progress towards clear targets is reviewed regularly. The arrangements for observing and evaluating teaching and learning are much improved but lack sufficient focus on the impact of teaching on learning.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- The college is not using the outcomes of initial assessment consistently well enough to plan all students' learning.
- Actions to improve the achievements of some minority ethnic learners are at too early a stage to evaluate.

- Although Hillcroft is a highly inclusive and nurturing environment in which all students receive unequivocal support and encouragement to succeed, the college recognises its formal arrangements for promoting equality and supporting diversity require improvement.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Monitor and analyse students' progress more rigorously to identify any groups which are at risk of not completing or achieving their qualification, taking prompt action to reduce underachievement.
- Ensure that all teaching staff use the outcomes of the initial assessment of students' needs consistently and effectively to inform target setting and planning for individual and group learning. Make sure that relevant information about students' needs is shared on a systematic basis between teachers and course teams.
- Further develop the scheme to observe and evaluate teaching, learning and assessment to ensure a greater focus on learning and assessment.
- Ensure that the recently developed and comprehensive action plan to improve the monitoring and development of equality and diversity within the college is fully and effectively implemented, particularly ensuring that all teachers give full consideration to the promotion of equality and diversity in planning learning and in all teaching sessions.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Good
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- The proportion of students who successfully complete accredited very short and long courses, which together comprise the very large majority of all enrolments, has improved progressively. Over the three years to 2012/13, success rates on both these types of course have risen to match national average rates, which are high. Students' success rates on the few short courses offered were low and declining over the same period, but have risen by nearly 20 percentage points during the academic year to date. College data for the first six months of this year indicate a continuing trend of improvement in success rates on all courses. Student retention and attendance rates are now high, having improved significantly from 2012/13 and into the current year.
- The vast majority of students have not been in learning for some time. Many suffer from problems which inhibit learning, or lack of confidence in their abilities. However, students rapidly become enthusiastic and self-confident, with a strong thirst for learning and achievement. A high proportion of students subsequently enter employment, improve their existing job prospects, or move on to higher levels of learning within the college or external institutions. A very high proportion of students who completed last year's access to higher education course subsequently gained entry to university.
- The quality of students' work in classrooms is good. Most students' personal, social and employability skills improve dramatically. During the inspection, past and present students were particularly keen to tell inspectors how attendance at the college had helped, or was helping, to improve their lives. The large majority of students regard the college as a safe haven in which they can flourish.
- Students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, achieve their qualifications at a rate at least as high as other students. However, while success rates are rising progressively, students from some minority ethnic groups achieve less well than others, as does the small cohort of younger students aged 19 to 20. The college has put in place a number of actions to tackle

these differences, but the overall impact of these actions will not be apparent until the end of the academic year.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, which is reflected in the good attainment of students' learning goals. The college provides good learning opportunities and support to meet the needs of its students, many of whom face significant problems which can inhibit learning, including dyslexia, dyspraxia or dyscalculia. Teaching develops students' self-confidence and academic skills well, for example enabling them to research and analyse historical and sociological texts.
- Teachers have high expectations of their students, and students respond well to this challenge. Teachers are very knowledgeable in their subject areas, and the great majority are highly effective in their ability to develop their students' knowledge and understanding; consequently, students develop their skills well. Teachers use relevant topics and a good variety of learning activities in classroom sessions to inspire students and engage them in their work. In a very few sessions observed by inspectors, teachers' instructions on what students needed to do were unclear.
- Students' learning in the vast majority of lessons is good and most students make significant progress in their understanding and application of theory and practice. For example, in one session observed, students on a GCSE higher mathematics course made rapid progress in learning about symmetry. They demonstrated a good understanding of practical mathematics skills and underpinning mathematical concepts.
- Support for students is excellent. Many students have fractured personal backgrounds or multiple learning needs and really value the excellent personal support that they receive. Teachers and students use tutorials well to set and review targets. In most lessons and support sessions, teachers provide carefully considered feedback on written work and help students develop individual learning strategies very well. Many students, as their confidence in their ability to learn increases, become enthusiastic about developing their independent learning skills; teachers provide very good practical support and encouragement for their endeavours. Students on access courses to higher education receive very good support and guidance with their university applications.
- Students support each other's learning well, notably those who live in one of the college's halls of residence for the duration of their course. Resident students have very good access to all of the college's learning resources and support on a 24-hour basis. The accommodation includes adequate provision for students with children. Students have good access to in-house nursery facilities and local childminders.
- Since the last inspection the college has put in place a satisfactory new initial assessment process. Dyslexia and dyspraxia testing is thorough and timely. While many teachers quickly gain a very good understanding of individual students' needs and interests, the outcomes of initial assessment are not used consistently well by all teaching staff to inform target setting or planning fully. The college is in the process of improving consistency in this practice, but it is too soon to see much impact.
- Students make significant progress in the development of their English and mathematics skills as an integral part of their studies. In addition, extra classes are offered which provide excellent opportunities to develop students' understanding of punctuation, spelling and grammar.
- All students receive appropriate and timely information, advice and guidance which support their learning very effectively. They are provided with useful information at the enquiry stage and benefit from the college's Starting Points programme, which includes taster sessions and individual advice and guidance about the most suitable courses. The college works closely with a range of specialist partners, such as the NHS Well Being service, whose staff visit the college regularly to offer individual advice and guidance which students find particularly valuable.

- The promotion of equality and diversity in lessons is not consistent. For example, in one lesson students drew out excellent comparisons between the rights of men and women in the 1920s and now. However, in a minority of sessions, teachers did not make enough use of naturally-occurring or planned opportunities to explore or promote aspects of equality or support the understanding of diversity.

The effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
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- Hillcroft College's managers and staff are wholly committed and dedicated to its mission of offering high-quality educational opportunities for adult women, many of whom have few qualifications on entry, are unemployed, have been out of learning for some time, or have experienced disruptions in their education. College managers have taken decisive and extensive actions to improve all aspects of its provision, following the poor outcome of its last inspection. These actions have led quickly and directly to much improved success, attendance and retention rates for the vast majority of students. The governing body provides close, well-informed support and challenge to the college's senior management.
- During 2013, the college made a number of highly effective changes to its management structure, redefined key roles to focus more on quality improvement in general, and in particular established a very well structured and effective approach to improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The few courses with poor success rates or very low student numbers were cancelled or revised, and more relevant and popular courses introduced. Managers identify good teaching and learning practice and share information about this increasingly well between teaching staff.
- A good range of reliable and timely data on students' attendance, progress and success rates is now available. Teaching staff, curriculum leads, managers and governors use these data very well for information, reporting and performance monitoring purposes.
- Managers have greatly improved the arrangements for observing and evaluating teaching and learning, and significantly extended the options for observation. Peer review and external consultancy are used well to set and sustain the standard and rigour of observations. Detailed training for college observers has been effective and observation records are now adequately detailed and perceptive. However, observation records indicate that some observers have too great a focus on evaluating teaching rather than its impact on learning, and the overall grade awarded for an observed session is sometimes over generous.
- The quality improvement team has identified a number of specific themes for further improving teaching practice which form part of a college-wide professional development programme. Systems for staff appraisal, observations, course reviews and target setting are increasingly cohesive and systematic.
- Teachers make good use of the college's recently improved and expanded information and communication technology (ICT) teaching and learning resources. Investment in information technology (IT) design and software has improved students' access to, and experience of, the college's virtual learning environment. Students also have good access to electronic information on their progress. Significant investment has been made to improve the college's fabric, fixtures and fittings, although most of the buildings are old and need considerable ongoing maintenance.
- The college's self-assessment process is thorough and particularly effective. The most recent self-assessment report (SAR) is much improved compared with those of preceding years. It is incisive, highly self-critical and evaluative, with very clear summaries of areas of strength and areas for improvement. Inspectors agreed with the majority of the judgements in the SAR, but believed that sufficient improvement had been made since the SAR was produced to warrant awarding higher grades. Action planning to improve the quality of provision is linked closely to the most recent SAR findings and the findings of the previous inspection. Improvement planning is thorough and well organised, and managers review progress towards meeting specific targets on a regular basis.

- Managers routinely review and monitor Hillcroft’s curriculum. A good range and variety of courses are offered on the very short course programmes, which form the vast majority of courses available. Managers have developed and introduced new courses from entry level through to advanced level. Although too few long advanced level programmes are currently offered, more are being introduced from late spring 2014. A recent curriculum review led to adjustments to the GCSE programme and the reintroduction of GCSE English. New modules have been introduced on the pre-access to higher education course, including an integrated biology and IT assignment which students enjoy very much.
- Hillcroft is a highly inclusive environment in which all students receive unequivocal support and encouragement to succeed. The college environment is calm and nurturing. Students relate well to each other and work productively together. While some groups continue to achieve less well than others, the college is making strong efforts to reduce these differences. All staff have received recent refresher training in equality and diversity, and teaching staff have also attended a session on promoting equality and supporting diversity in teaching and learning. The college has an adequate single equality scheme. However, during a very recent audit, managers identified that formal arrangements for monitoring and developing the promotion of equality and support for diversity require improvement. A comprehensive action plan has been produced and its implementation has only just started.
- Hillcroft College’s arrangements for safeguarding students meet statutory requirements and risk is managed appropriately. Staff have received adequate safeguarding training within the past two years. A designated staff member routinely carries out risk assessments and students feel safe at the college. Basic security arrangements, such as CCTV and keypad entry locks, are in place.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Provider name: Hillcroft College

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

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Community learning	2

Provider details

Type of provider	Specialist designated institution							
Age range of learners	19+							
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	Full-time: 12							
	Part-time: 345							
Principal/CEO	Michael Wheeler							
Date of previous inspection	December 2012							
Website address	www.hillcroft.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	-	-	-	2	-	19	-	-
Part-time	-	245	-	83	-	-	-	-
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+	16-18	19+
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Number of learners aged 14-16								
Full-time	N/A							
Part-time	N/A							
Number of community learners	349							
Number of employability learners	N/A							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	None							

Contextual information

Hillcroft College is a charitable organisation based in Surbiton, south-west London. It is a small residential college for women aged over 19 years. Courses are predominantly very short and last for a few days, or short, lasting several weeks. For a small number of learners on the GCSE, pre-access or access to higher education courses, the duration is much longer, from two terms to an academic year. The college attracts learners from across England, but most currently come from London. It has 50 bedrooms and an onsite nursery. Many learners are unemployed when they join the college, have been out of learning for some time, or have experienced disruptions in their education through, for example, ill health. Many have few qualifications when they join and receive financial support to attend.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Nicholas Crombie, HMI

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by Hillcroft College's director of teaching and learning 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 relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision and graded the sector subject area 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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