

Adult College for Rural East Sussex (ACRES)

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		13–15 May 2014
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Requires improvement-3
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:

- Success rates on most courses are high.
- Practical and technical skills developed by students during their time at ACRES are at least good, and in some cases outstanding.
- Teaching and learning are good. Teachers challenge students well during lessons to extend their understanding beyond course requirements.
- Learning is enjoyable and students are enthusiastic about learning; many progress on to further studies either within ACRES or with other providers.
- Initial advice and guidance are good, and tutors support students particularly well when they consider 'next step' options.
- The management of tutors' performance is robust. It leads to the continuous improvement of teaching, learning and assessment, through timely and supportive interventions.
- The senior management team of ACRES has an accurate understanding of the quality of provision and what is needed to improve it further.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- Learning accommodation and resources are not always sufficiently good to ensure that all students experience consistently effective and uninterrupted learning.
- Managers do not have sufficient access to timely and detailed data; this impedes their decision making and hampers a speedy response to problems.
- Within the past year, managers and staff have developed and implemented many improvements successfully to the provision within ACRES. However, a minority of these have yet to become effective across the whole organisation to benefit all students.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Improve the opportunities for all students to develop and assess their learning, so that it meets not only the course aims but also fully meets their own initial and emerging personal goals.
- Fully implement the virtual learning environment, to provide an effective resource which enables all students to extend learning outside the classroom.
- Ensure that all learning venues and courses are appropriately resourced, by reducing the impact of disruption from outside classrooms, and providing teaching resources which are appropriate and of a consistent standard across all venues and courses.
- Use data in a manner which constantly supports managers in their quest to make ACRES an outstanding provider. Introduce a data system which informs managers of trends in students' performance in a timely way, and use this information accurately to substantiate strengths and areas for improvement.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Good
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- Success rates are high on non-accredited courses, which make up the majority of the total offer. At the previous inspection, non-accredited success rate data were not reliable because of insufficiently challenging or suitable course learning aims. Success rate data are now reliable. Overall, success rates on accredited courses in 2013/14 are at an average level and steadily improving. The proportion of students achieving grades A* to C in English and mathematics at GCSE is good and satisfactory respectively.
- Students are highly motivated and enjoy learning. Most attend frequently and punctually and most make good progress in lessons. They develop good skills, particularly in practical and technical subjects.
- The standard of students' work is at least good, with some excellent examples of students providing work that is well beyond the standard required by the course aims. Students develop increased levels of self-confidence and self-belief and many progress to further learning.
- English and mathematics students develop good levels of understanding and many become confident in applying practical techniques in their work and home life. Many students enrolled on short, entry level literacy and numeracy courses progress well to long English and mathematics functional skills qualifications; a smaller number progress to GCSE qualifications.
- Since the previous inspection, managers have successfully reduced the gaps in achievement between particular groups of students. For example, success rates for men and for students with a recognised additional learning need are much improved, and are now similar respectively to success rates for women or students who have no recognised additional learning need.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
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- Teaching, learning and assessment are good as reflected in the good outcomes achieved by students. Tutors are highly supportive of their students and have high expectations. In the best lessons, tutors challenge students keenly to achieve high standards of work that are well above those required by course aims. Many tutors use their knowledge and experience particularly well to make learning fun and enjoyable.
- Most tutors plan well for lessons to meet the course subject aims and use a good range of learning activities and teaching methods to maintain interest and motivate students. Students have an excellent rapport with their tutors and this encourages them to participate and

contribute well regardless of their starting points. Students settle in to learning quickly and are more confident as a result.

- Independent learning is encouraged effectively in many classes. For example, students in an Italian class meet outside the lesson to practise their language skills and often return with many questions for the tutor. Tutors have made good progress in improving access by students to the on-line learning resources that they have developed. However, at the time of the inspection, the availability of on-line learning resources varied too much across ACRES, and not enough students could benefit from extending their learning beyond the classroom.
- A small number of lessons is adversely affected by the venue in which they are taught. For example, a web-design class did not have industry standard software available and this restricted students' ability to bring work in from home. A small number of classes in community venues is badly affected by noise from activities in adjacent rooms such as an indoor bowls arena or a crèche.
- Overall, the planning of learning to meet a student's individual needs is adequate. Some students benefit greatly from clearly defined personal learning goals effectively reviewed by tutors. However, as recognised by managers, this method is not yet fully established. Too many students do not have a sufficient opportunity to assess what the learning means to them, and how they can develop their learning further to meet their personal interests.
- Verbal feedback to students on their progress is good. Tutors are supportive, give appropriate praise, correct students and explain clearly how they can improve. Students value this immediate approach. Foreign language tutors are particularly skilled at this; for example, they gently correct pronunciation in a supportive way that gives students added confidence.
- A minority of tutors gives full and very helpful written feedback, identifying where students can improve and, where appropriate, highlighting possible alternative approaches to the work. However, too much written feedback is restricted to praise and does not give sufficient information on how the student could improve further.
- The teaching of English and mathematics is good in dedicated classes. Students' progress is good and monitored well by tutors. Work is marked effectively, with clear feedback on how to improve. However, in a small minority of cases, planning of lessons is insufficiently directed by initial assessments in English and mathematics, which identify students' starting points. In other lessons, tutors do not always take full advantage of opportunities to develop students' skills in English and mathematics.
- The information and advice given to students are effective. Prospective students receive easily understood information about each course. Staff assess students' prior skills appropriately at the start of their programme, and use the results well to ensure that they are placed on the most suitable courses. Students receive appropriate and effective guidance on their next steps from very supportive tutors, leading to courses either at ACRES or with other providers.
- Equality and diversity are appropriately promoted to students. In classes an atmosphere of mutual respect prevails. Tutors ensure that learning materials reflect the diversity of the British population and generally do not reinforce stereotypes.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leadership and management are good. Since the previous inspection, students and the local community have benefited from managers' implementation of a well-considered strategic plan that provides an unequivocal clarity of direction and purpose. This plan has revitalised the organisation and the focus on improvement is impressive. The management of staff performance has been particularly effective in improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Managers have an accurate picture of the organisation's strengths and areas for further improvement; however, they do not have timely access to detailed data, which hampers the speed with which they can identify and tackle problems.

- Senior managers have challenging, but realistic, expectations for the organisation. The targets set and all actions to improve successfully and closely align to key strategic objectives. Monitoring of progress is constant and effective. The tutors in the disparate workforce are highly valued by managers for what they do; in turn, they recognise that the organisation is well managed. Tutors have a clear understanding of the aims of the organisation and are actively involved in continuously reviewing and improving performance.
- Members of the board bring with them strong educational backgrounds and a sound understanding of the courses required to meet the needs of a diverse community. Members are well informed and monitor progress well; they effectively challenge senior managers to make continuous and sustained improvements, including in teaching and learning. The board is responsive to new initiatives to increase and extend the profile of ACRES within the community, and members are becoming more active in sharing their resources to aid managers and staff at ACRES in developing its service.
- Changes in the management of staff performance have led to a common system to support improvement across the whole organisation. The management of staff performance is now robust, and communication between managers and tutors is good. Over the past year, managers have made significant improvements in assessing the capabilities of individual tutors, using a broad range of information to maintain accurate records. Managers constantly review the performance of individual tutors through individual tracking, in a process that is dynamic and leads to timely and supportive interventions.
- Managers use mentoring, peer observations and coaching effectively to support improvements. Tutors are encouraged to reflect constantly on their performance and take appropriate actions without reference to their line manager, and, as confidence grows, a small number of tutors are effectively doing so. Managers now take quick and decisive actions to address any teaching that is consistently less effective.
- Managers have a good understanding of the quality of the provision. The self-assessment report is judgemental and accurate. Quality improvement plans are closely aligned to the self-assessment report and are effectively and frequently reviewed. Recommendations for improvements from the previous inspection are either fully met or are in the process of implementation. Managers recognise that, as part of the organisation's development, a few aspects of its provision have yet to be consistently and fully effective across the organisation.
- Managers and staff seek students' views actively and frequently; they attend robustly to the few concerns raised, and nearly all students are very pleased with the service they receive.
- The planning of the curriculum is constantly under review to ensure it meets local needs. Over the past year, partnership arrangements have ensured that ACRES is starting to attract more 'hard to reach' students through the development and introduction of bespoke courses. For example, courses are now in place for students with learning disabilities and for young mothers. Students progress very well from these courses to further study. Course cancellations continue to be too high, although recent actions to reduce cancellations are starting to show success.
- The management of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The learning environment in venues is respectful and inclusive and the student profile broadly meets that of the local community. Most tutors have been trained in how to improve their students' understanding of equality and diversity in lessons, but the implementation of this objective has not yet been fully successful. Managers monitor the success rates of particular groups of students appropriately.
- ACRES meets statutory requirements for safeguarding students. Managers and staff undertake appropriate risk assessment of learning activities and venues. With the introduction of courses for more vulnerable students, new and suitably effective safeguarding arrangements have been introduced.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Adult College for Rural East Sussex (ACRES)

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	Independent learning provider							
Age range of learners	19+							
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	Full-time; n/a Part-time; 1321							
Principal/CEO	Christine Jervis							
Date of previous inspection	8 February 2013							
Website address	www.acreslearning.org.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+
	-	983	-	122	-	4	-	-
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	-	-	-	-	-	-		
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	-		-		-			
Number of learners aged 14-16	-							
Full-time	-							
Part-time	-							
Number of community learners	1109							
Number of employability learners	-							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ N/a 							

Contextual information

ACRES is a consortium of four East Sussex community colleges that manages the adult learning programmes in the Wealden District Council area and includes the towns of Crowborough, Hailsham, Heathfield, Uckfield and Wadhurst. Its main administrative centre is in Uckfield. ACRES offers community learning in several subject areas including ICT, fitness, leisure and recreation, visual arts, languages, English and mathematics. Courses are held in community colleges and a wide range of local venues. ACRES has around 90 part-time or sessional tutors. Wealden is a predominantly rural area, has low levels of unemployment and mixed levels of deprivation. Few Black, Asian, Chinese and other minority ethnic residents live in Wealden when compared with the South East and England.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Richard Beaumont HMI

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by the quality, learning and development manager as nominee, carried out the inspection at 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 and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners; these views are reflected throughout the report. They observed learning sessions and assessments. 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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