

Sussex Downs College

General further education college

| Inspection dates | 3–6 November 2015 |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Overall effectiveness | Requires improvement |
| Effectiveness of leadership and management | Requires improvement |
| Quality of teaching, learning and assessment | Requires improvement |
| Personal development, behaviour and welfare | Good |
| Outcomes for learners | Requires improvement |
| 16 to 19 study programmes | Requires improvement |
| Adult learning programmes | Good |
| Apprenticeships | Good |
| Provision for learners with high needs | Good |
| Overall effectiveness at previous inspection | Good |

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- Leaders and managers have not sufficiently improved the quality of provision and outcomes for learners since the previous inspection.
- Managers' actions to secure consistently good progress for learners across all sites are insufficiently effective, leading to too much variation in quality.
- Teaching and learning, especially on study programmes, do not meet all learners' needs, promote the highest standards or provide sufficient challenge and stimulus for the most able.
- Too many learners, especially on study programmes, make slow progress in improving their English and mathematical skills, and their level of success in these subjects is too low.
- A significant minority of learners do not achieve sufficiently well in their final assessments and examinations.
- Too many learners, especially those on A-level courses, do not make sufficient progress, given their starting points, and too few achieve high grades in their examinations.
- Too few apprentices aged 16 to 18 successfully complete their apprenticeship.

The provider has the following strengths

- Managers have created an inclusive culture in which learners feel safe and are respectful towards their teachers and peers.
- Learners with high needs enjoy particularly good care and achieve well.
- Learners receive good initial careers information, advice and guidance.
- The development of learners' skills in craft-based and apprenticeship programmes is good.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Sussex Downs College is a large general further education college in the south-east of England. It has three main sites, in Eastbourne, Lewes and Newhaven, serving these communities and those in the wider environs. The college offers provision in all of the 15 subject areas of learning and has a substantial apprenticeship contract. It does not offer traineeships and has no learners aged 14 to 16.
- Overall, learner numbers have fallen over the last three years. Currently, around 8,000 learners study at the college. Of these, just over one half are aged 16 to 18 and study full time. Just over 3,000 are adult learners, mainly on part-time courses, including significant numbers on community learning provision. The number of apprentices is growing and is currently around 800. The proportion of pupils in East Sussex schools attaining five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, is much the same as for the south-east of England overall. The communities served by the college vary significantly in their levels of social and economic well-being, with pockets of deprivation within generally positive economic environments. The unemployment rate in East Sussex is below regional and national rates.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Senior managers must define clearly the high standards they expect for teaching, learning and assessment, ensure that all teachers understand these, and closely monitor the impact of these on the speed and depth of learners' learning and understanding.
- Teachers must set each learner targets that challenge them to achieve the highest standards of work, and plan activities that enable each learner to make progress towards achieving these high standards. Activities must engage all learners and foster a culture of high aspiration.
- Improve teaching and learning for GCSE mathematics and English, and increase the proportion of learners who achieve these qualifications. Ensure that learners' mathematics and English skills continue to be developed throughout their main vocational and academic programmes.
- Leaders and managers must ensure consistently effective management practice across all college sites to enable learners to make good progress regardless of their location and their programme.
- Senior managers must review and revise quality assurance and self-assessment arrangements so that managers at all levels evaluate provision against demanding criteria and use this evaluation to plan and prioritise improvement.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have not improved the quality of provision or outcomes for learners quickly enough. Although improvements are evident in some aspects of provision, as a consequence of the inconsistent quality of teaching, learning and assessment, too many learners do not make the progress of which they are capable.
- The new Principal, and the revitalised governing body, recognise the challenges facing the college, and are accelerating the pace of improvement. Open acknowledgement of the college's weaknesses, coupled with clarity of leadership and an insistence on striving for excellence, have improved staff morale. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen the capacity of senior and middle management.
- Leaders are taking urgent steps to eradicate inconsistencies in quality by unifying the different parts of the college. While progress is being made, management practices vary unnecessarily between sites. For example, curriculum managers with responsibility for the same programmes on different sites do not always coordinate their efforts to improve provision, and self-assessment arrangements do not give an overview of curriculum performance across the college.
- Arrangements for improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment have not yet had sufficient impact. Virtually all teachers are capable practitioners, but the extent to which they set demanding work for all learners, both in and out of lessons, is too variable. Managers have used performance management arrangements well to challenge, and in some cases remove, those who do not demonstrate high expectations for their learners. However, not all staff completed a formal appraisal last year.
- Self-assessment is comprehensive but, particularly at course level, the criteria used for determining the quality of provision are insufficiently demanding. Data are not always used effectively to analyse with sufficient precision learners' success or progress.
- The range of courses available to learners and apprentices is tailored well to both the aspirations of individuals and to local employers' requirements. Leaders have commissioned research that shows that the college makes a significant contribution to local economic growth. New leaders have ambitious plans to strengthen further the college's response to labour market information and the Local Enterprise Partnership's priorities, and these are already having a positive impact.
- Leaders have responded to the introduction of study programmes by ensuring that learners receive good advice and guidance on choosing programmes that match their future intentions. However, not enough learners on vocational courses benefit from external work experience. Too many learners make slow progress in improving their English and mathematics, and too many do not receive their entitlement to good-quality tutorials to enrich their experience.
- Most aspects of apprenticeship provision are managed well, and arrangements for ensuring that subcontractors deliver training of a good or better quality have been strengthened recently.
- Staff and learners collaborate well to promote an inclusive culture throughout the college, with a strong and successful focus on respecting differences, for example in respect of sexual orientation and culture. The student union is pivotal in promoting harmonious relationships, and is deliberating over how best to promote fundamental British values.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - The governing body is led well. Effective succession planning has strengthened members' capacity to work with leaders to bring about improvement, and the mandate governors have set for the new Principal is unequivocally aspirational.
 - In the past, governors have been too optimistic about the college's educational performance, and too tolerant of mediocre performance. In recent months, governors have put increasing pressure on leaders and managers to tackle deep-seated weaknesses and raise aspirations.
 - Governors benefit from effective clerking arrangements and detailed reports from senior managers. However, governors and senior managers do not always identify the most important performance indicators of learners' achievements, focusing almost exclusively on successful qualification completion.
 - Governors ensure that financial management is prudent. The financial position of the college has improved recently, but governors recognise the significant future financial pressures facing the college and the need to reverse the decline in learner numbers.
- **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**
 - Staff responsible for safeguarding learners are extremely thorough in ensuring that they are safe, and

that both statutory requirements and good practice are adhered to in keeping detailed records, including in the recruitment of staff.

- College managers work particularly well with other agencies throughout the county to share information and identify and support learners who are potentially at risk.
- Arrangements to ensure that learners are not exposed to health and safety risks, both at the college and in external placements, are comprehensive and effective.
- Learners, including those with high needs, feel safe at the college. Leaders are aware of the potential risks of having campuses that are easily accessible to the general public and keep this under review.
- Leaders and governors have made progress in responding to the Prevent duty. All relevant staff have been trained, and links with external liaison officers are good. However, learners' awareness of the specific risk arising from those who may wish to promote extremist views has not yet been raised sufficiently.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment do not lead to sufficiently good outcomes for learners. The quality of lessons and other learning activities provided by different teachers varies too much, particularly those teaching learners aged 16 to 18 on study programmes. However, teaching, learning and assessment for apprentices, learners with high needs and adult learners is often good and these learners make good progress.
- Most learners take part in lessons enthusiastically and enjoy their work. When teachers provide learners with activities and resources that allow them to debate, evaluate and practise applying their skills and knowledge, learners work hard and make good progress. However, managers have taken insufficient steps to ensure that all learners benefit from learning activities of a sufficiently high standard. In a significant minority of lessons, mainly for learners aged 16 to 18, teachers do not plan or set sufficiently challenging tasks to allow learners, particularly the most able, to acquire and practise new skills and knowledge quickly enough.
- Many teachers, particularly those of apprentices and adults, monitor learners' progress closely and plan lessons that challenge each learner. The majority of teachers challenge learners to improve through judicious questioning that expects them to apply their prior learning well. Learners on craft-based vocational courses mostly produce work of a high standard in their lessons.
- Most teachers set regular homework and learners use the resources on the virtual learning environment well to enhance their research.
- Learning support assistants mostly provide effective support for learners needing extra help with their studies. They understand learners' support needs well and encourage them successfully to work independently. A small number of learning support assistants working with learners with profound learning difficulties on community courses complete too much of the work for them.
- Teachers assess learners' work well and set appropriate assignments to meet the demands of their qualifications. Assessment of apprentices is particularly impressive, both in off-the-job training and through frequent, productive visits from assessors to the workplace. Most teachers provide learners with feedback that helps them to improve their work. Mostly, learners know the grades they should be aiming for and are set appropriate target grades. However, learners aged 16 to 18 and learners with high needs do not have sufficient guidance on how to achieve their targets and receive insufficient encouragement to strive for the highest grades. A small number of learners do not know the standards they are expected to achieve.
- Managers and teachers do not plan tutorials well enough to ensure that learners' overall progress is adequately monitored or to give sufficient attention to planning future learning. On study programmes, learners' targets for improvement are insufficiently precise or do not cover all aspects of their programme of study. Tutorials do not enable the majority of learners adequately to track their progress in acquiring their English and mathematical skills. Apprentices and access learners benefit from good individualised target-setting and support which ensures that they gain the key work-related skills they need to be successful.
- Teachers and support staff have established a culture in which learners respect each other and understand the importance of valuing diversity. Teachers ensure that learners behave well in lessons and encourage them to listen to each other and respect each other's opinions and contributions to discussions. Learners acting as learner representatives raise other learners' awareness of equality and

diversity successfully.

- Teaching and learning for English and mathematics require improvement overall. GCSE mathematics teachers do not take account of learners' prior achievements sufficiently, or the gaps in their knowledge, when planning lessons. Teachers of vocational and academic subjects do not promote English and mathematics sufficiently in their teaching. Some produce useful glossaries of technical language, but most rarely plan to tackle learners' lack of knowledge in these subjects or set them targets to help learners use English and mathematics better in their studies. Functional skills teachers plan and teach effective English and mathematics lessons that help learners to improve their skills, although for apprentices these lessons are less effective.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

- The large majority of learners are confident and want to succeed. They often come to the college with a good attitude towards their studies. Many teachers and other staff nurture and encourage this readiness to learn.
- Learners attend well for most lessons, although they attend less well for GCSE and functional skills mathematics and English lessons. They are usually punctual and ready for successful learning and are encouraged by their teachers to take personal responsibility to become independent learners.
- Across all types of provision, learners work very well together in lessons and more widely in their studies. Peer support is a regular feature in many lessons; for example, advanced-level hospitality learners act as peer advisors to foundation-level learners to very good effect.
- Managers ensure that learners benefit from very good initial careers advice and guidance. This supports them in a structured and personalised way, equipping them with all of the information they need to make their preliminary study decisions. A range of introductory events allow learners to consolidate their choices effectively.
- Teachers' and staff's subsequent advice to assist learners during their studies to prepare for their next steps is not consistently good. While learners are very well supported to make successful applications to a range of universities, staff do not always guide them adequately to make informed decisions about employment.
- Learners overwhelmingly value the inclusive and harmonious ethos at the college where mutual respect and tolerance are carefully fostered through a range of well-chosen themed activities. For example, the 'White Ribbon' initiative has engaged and inspired learners to speak openly and sensitively about domestic violence and has developed their confidence to challenge inappropriate attitudes to this.
- Learners feel very safe at the college and speak very eloquently about how they support each other to be safe, building on a range of activities at the college on cyber safety and personal safety. However, they are not yet encouraged to consider fully the threats to their safety posed by radicalisation and extremist groups.

Outcomes for learners require improvement

- Since the previous inspection, when outcomes for learners also required improvement, the proportion of learners completing their courses successfully has remained too low. Overall, adult learners perform better than learners aged 16 to 18, and on level 1 and 2 courses they often perform better than adults at similar colleges. Learners on level 3 vocational courses improved their performance in 2014/15, to just exceed national rates, and do better than A-level learners.
- At the previous inspection, a high proportion of level 3 learners did not make the progress expected of them, based on their starting points, and too few achieved high grades. This continues to be the case overall. While most level 3 learners on vocational courses make good progress, A-level learners often do not. The extent to which learners on AS courses make good progress has improved only modestly since the previous inspection and not at all, overall, for learners on A-level courses.
- The number of learners completing their functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics successfully has continued to improve since the previous inspection, with success often better than the average for similar colleges, but the level of success is still too low overall. The number of higher-grade passes for GCSE English and mathematics has also improved, especially for English, but for both subjects they are too low.
- Many apprentices continue to do well on their programmes and successfully complete their

apprenticeship. However, there is still too much variation between success rates for different subject areas. The number of apprentices aged 16 to 18 successfully completing their apprenticeship is low, and falling.

- The college pays particular attention to the performance of different groups of learners to identify any underperformance. There are no significant achievement gaps.
- Learners' progression to further studies, both within the college and to other education and training, is good. Based on more reliable information than at the previous inspection, around 50% of learners completing their courses in 2014/15 progressed to a higher-level course. Progression to higher education is good, both for A-level and vocational learners, at around 60% for level 3 learners in 2014/15. Learners on access to higher education courses make particularly good progress to their chosen universities. Learners with high needs are prepared well for, and are often successful in, their progression to work.

Types of provision

16 to 19 study programmes

require improvement

- The college provides study programmes in 14 of the 15 subject areas. Currently, some 3,787 learners are on 16 to 19 study programmes. Approximately one third follow academic programmes and the remainder study vocational or craft-based courses from foundation level to level 3. The largest areas are creative arts, science and mathematics, and health.
- Teachers on craft-based courses deliver effective lessons, linking theory well to skills development, which interests and involves learners successfully. However, on certificate and diploma vocational courses, teachers' expectations are too low and too many learners make insufficient progress. Too often, teachers do not cater for the individual needs of all learners. On A-level courses, the more able are insufficiently stretched, do not make the progress they should given their starting points and do not achieve the grades of which they are capable.
- Teachers provide good advice and guidance to learners, both on entry to the college and during their courses, in preparation for progression to higher-level courses, employment or training. A wide range of subject-specific activities, such as career fairs, guest speakers and visits to employers, help learners to make informed choices about their futures. Subject-related activities motivate and guide learners to make successful applications to the most competitive universities.
- Teachers do not promote learners' development of English and mathematics skills sufficiently well. Within courses, teachers seldom mention the application or importance of these skills. Learners' attendance at GCSE mathematics lessons is too low. Too much teaching does not meet the needs of the wide range of learners' abilities in lessons and too few pass their examination. Attendance for English is much higher and many more learners attain higher grades.
- Managers do not ensure that all learners receive their entitlement to tutorial support, in both content and frequency. Too often, they miss activities to develop their wider personal skills and timely opportunities to discuss with tutors how they might improve. For example, recently, too many had not attended tutorials on online safety or had a recent meeting with their tutor to review their progress. Learners do feel safe, however, and their safeguarding is effective.
- Managers and teachers do not ensure that learners' development of employability skills is always good. Opportunities for planned work experience are limited and teachers do not always plan other activities to compensate for a lack of these. Occupational courses, such as brickwork and vehicle maintenance, include meaningful work experience, helping learners to progress into employment and apprenticeships. A minority of other courses develop understanding of vocational areas through real work assignments; for example, media learners work with businesses to produce videos for the local chamber of commerce.

Adult learning programmes

are good

- Adults account for about one third of the total number of learners at the college, with the large majority studying part-time programmes, including functional skills, English, mathematics, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), vocational courses and a range of provision in the local communities. Some 229 full-time learners attend a range of access to higher education courses, including in combined science, humanities and counselling.
- Managers work effectively with employers and community partners to ensure that learners have a wide

range of courses to improve their skills and employment prospects. For example, managers have developed specialist courses with mental health charities and family nurse practitioners which improve learners' well-being and greatly support young parents. Although the college has recently offered specific employability courses to support unemployed adults in the local area, none is offered currently.

- Learners benefit from teachers' high expectations and industry-related technical expertise, gaining high-level practical skills. Learners enjoy their learning and most achieve well. They value their newly acquired knowledge, skills and qualifications, including in English and mathematics, in helping them to progress further in their learning, improve their employment opportunities and support their family. The large majority of learners on access to higher education courses achieve their qualification and go to their chosen university.
- In the large majority of lessons, teachers use questions skilfully to make learners think hard, recall prior knowledge and apply it to new situations. In addition, they use individual coaching and mentoring well, enabling all learners to improve their work. Learners experience a range of interesting and relevant activities and frequently use the college's virtual learning environment for research and additional practice, preparing them well for assignments and examinations. Teachers' written feedback on learners' work is timely, clear, thorough and supportive, identifying areas for improvement including the correction of English and mathematics.
- Learners feel safe and are safe in college and in community settings. When working together they listen carefully to their peers, are respectful of peers' different cultures, abilities and beliefs, promoting highly productive learning. In a speaking and listening lesson for ESOL, for example, more-advanced learners worked well with newer learners, teaching them new vocabulary and pronunciation through shopping role-play situations.
- In a small minority of lessons, teachers' ineffective planning and assessment strategies take into consideration the often diverse range of learners' starting points insufficiently, or fail to challenge learners to make good progress. In a few lessons, learners' attendance is low and punctuality is poor.

Apprenticeships

are good

- In nine subject areas, the largest of which are business administration, health and social care, and construction, 792 apprentices are working towards completing an apprenticeship framework. Of these, 269 are advanced apprentices. Subcontractors deliver a significant amount of apprenticeship training.
- The large majority of teachers make off-the-job training interesting and challenging for apprentices. For example, brickwork, carpentry and motor vehicle apprentices work on examples from industry and from their own workplaces, helping them to advance in their jobs. Brickwork and professional cookery apprentices support their peers readily to help them to improve their work. In a minority of lessons, where teachers talk too lengthily about things unrelated to lesson objectives, apprentices lose interest and their learning is hampered.
- Apprentices often make good progress with the subject-specific elements of their programme as teachers and assessors successfully build on apprentices' prior experiences and the tasks they undertake at work. This is reflected in the often good overall success of apprentices, although for those aged 16 to 18 success rates are too low. Teachers are less successful in helping apprentices to understand the importance of, and to make sufficient progress with, their development of mathematics and English. Too many do not pass the functional skills elements of their apprenticeship framework.
- Good coordination between teachers, assessors and employers ensures that most apprentices learn well from their on-the-job training. Assessment of apprentices in their workplaces is planned well and is effective. Assessors have high expectations of apprentices and set them realistic and challenging targets. Assessors use their own industry experiences skilfully to guide and advise apprentices, so they can make appropriate choices about their next steps. Assessors' feedback to apprentices is detailed and suggests ways in which they can improve and develop their work. It is particularly good for customer services and health care apprentices.
- Teachers and assessors do not ensure that all apprentices' understanding of equality and diversity is comprehensively well developed. For example, in hairdressing, health and social care, and professional cookery, they develop apprentices' knowledge of diversity including cultural influences and factors such as potential allergic reactions, but teachers in construction trades do not promote aspects of diversity sufficiently.
- Apprentices' attendance at lessons is good, and the large majority take pride in their work and seek out additional challenges. The health and safety of apprentices are managed well, both at the college and in

workplaces. The induction booklets for apprentices and employers set out very clearly the respective responsibilities and apprentices feel safe both at college and at work. Their safeguarding is effective.

Provision for learners with high needs

is good

- The college has increased the number of learners with high needs recently, responding to the local priority to serve their needs locally, and provides for 73 learners, working in cooperation with East Sussex County Council and the City of Brighton and Hove. Of these, 44 learners are on specially designed courses and the remainder are integrated within vocational programmes across the college.
- Teachers work closely and well with their learners, who speak positively about these strong working relationships. They help learners to become confident and active members of the college community, contributing at all levels of learner life. For example, learners are fully integrated with the work of the college's student union and they hold fundraising events for local charities, while those in hospitality are involved in the 'Kings Pantry', a food outlet for learners and staff. Learners feel safe in the college and their safeguarding is effective.
- In lessons, most of which are of good quality, teachers ensure that learners develop good vocational skills relevant to their courses of study. They help learners to understand and appreciate the relevance of the theory they learn by relating it closely to its practical applications, and learners stay interested and make good progress. For example, learners studying sport developed training plans that they later used in another lesson to help deliver practical activities.
- Teachers ensure that the vast majority of learners on the discrete high-needs programmes develop good employability skills. They have good opportunities for real work experience leading to employment. For example, 'Project Search' is a supported one-year internship programme, run by job coaches in conjunction with East Sussex County Council and an Eastbourne NHS hospital. Ninety per cent of learners on the programme in 2014/15 gained employment.
- On discrete programmes, teachers make sure that learners have very personalised termly targets for their work and improvement, matched to their individual needs. Learners are very much involved in setting and agreeing their targets. In the best lessons, teachers break down the targets to give smaller understandable and realistic targets. However, teachers and learners do not review targets regularly enough and learners do not always know how they are performing against their overall goals.
- Managers ensure that additional learning support is provided to all learners with high needs. It now covers speech and language therapy, one-to-one, as well as other general support needs. In better lessons, learning support workers work well to prompt and support learners to be successful and make progress. Often, however, teachers do not plan and manage the work of support workers sufficiently well and support is not fully utilised.

Provider details

| | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Type of provider | General further education college |
| Age range of learners | 16+ |
| Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year | 10,430 |
| Principal/CEO | Mike Hopkins |
| Website address | www.sussexdowns.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 | |
|--|--|-----|-----------------|-----|---------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ |
| Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships) | 622 | 826 | 720 | 716 | 2,743 | 777 | 13 | 926 |
| | Intermediate | | Advanced | | Higher | | | |
| Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ |
| | 138 | 371 | 42 | 227 | 0 | 14 | | |
| Number of traineeships | 16–19 | | 19+ | | Total | | | |
| | - | | - | | - | | | |
| Number of learners aged 14–16 | N/A | | | | | | | |
| Funding received from | Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency | | | | | | | |
| At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ ProActive ■ Albion in the Community ■ Complete Assessment and Training Solutions Limited ■ Train for the Future ■ Premier Global ■ Romney Resource ■ Furniture Now ■ East Sussex County Council | | | | | | | |

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

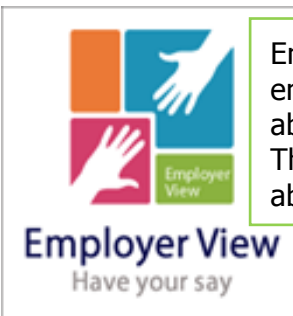
| | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| David Martin, lead inspector | Her Majesty's Inspector |
| Alan Hinchliffe | Her Majesty's Inspector |
| Steven Tucker | Her Majesty's Inspector |
| Ann Monaghan | Ofsted Inspector |
| Andrew Stittle | Ofsted Inspector |
| Tricia Collis | Ofsted Inspector |
| Keith Boulnois | Ofsted Inspector |
| Alison Muggridge | Ofsted Inspector |
| Raymond Walker | Ofsted Inspector |
| Richard Deane | Ofsted Inspector |

The above team was assisted by the Vice-Principal (Curriculum and Enterprise), as nominee, and 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 used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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