

Education and Services for People with Autism (ESPA)

Independent specialist college

Inspection dates

9–11 November 2016

Overall effectiveness		Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good	Provision for learners with high needs Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good	
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good	
Outcomes for learners	Good	
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Good

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- Trustees and the leadership team ensure sound financial management and take strong and decisive action that improves the quality of the service for students.
- Good teaching, learning and assessment develop students' skills very well and they attain relevant qualifications which prepare them for their next steps in education or training, and in achieving greater independence.
- Staff have high expectations of students, who make good progress from their starting points.
- Highly skilled and trained staff support improvements in students' behaviour effectively and this enables them to participate well in learning at college and in wider community settings.
- Students' complex needs are met very effectively by the wide range of flexible and individualised vocational programmes both at ESPA and at local further education colleges.
- Students are protected well from the potential dangers of radicalisation and extremism as a result of the highly effective practice in the individualised approach to risk assessment.
- Students' social and personal skills are significantly improved by participating in good-quality enrichment activities which help to prepare them well for life in modern Britain.

Full report

Information about the provider

- ESPA College, opened in 1995, is part of Education and Services for People with Autism, a limited company with charitable status. The college provides education and specialist support for day and residential students who have autism spectrum disorder, aged 16 to 25 years, from the local region and nationally. There are currently 41 day and eight residential students. The college is based across four sites, with two halls of residence. At 8% of students are of minority ethnic heritage and 88% are male.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Trustees and leaders should work with managers and staff to:
 - maximise students' opportunities to learn inside and outside lessons by ensuring that the information technology (IT) systems at the college are fit for purpose and reliable at all sites
 - develop additional partnerships with employers to provide students with the opportunity to develop their skills in a wider range of workplace settings and to increase the numbers who progress from ESPA into paid employment
 - ensure that middle managers receive training and ongoing support on how to use management information and data effectively to enable them to set challenging improvement targets
 - ensure that all staff receive training and are assessed in the use of personal emergency evacuation plans (PEEPs) so that they know what actions to take in an emergency, to ensure that the few students who have been issued with the plan are safe at all times
 - ensure that the quality of provision is good at all college sites, particularly at Middlesbrough.
- Managers should ensure that tutors receive feedback regarding the quality of their lessons which focuses more on learning, standards of students' work, the level of their skills development and their progress, and less on the process of teaching.
- Tutors of discrete English and mathematics classes should clearly explain to students why they are developing these skills and provide them with real examples of how and when they will use them in all aspects of their lives, so that students are motivated to make good or better progress in developing these skills for use at work, at home and in the community.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders and managers have a clear and ambitious vision for the future of the college and its students. The vision focuses on continually improving the quality of the students' learning experience and on increasing the number of students who progress to paid employment, particularly in those priority sectors identified by the North East local enterprise partnership, such as creative technology. They invest in, and make further improvements to, college sites and resources so that students benefit from good-quality resources.
- Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have made a number of significant and positive changes to the college. A staffing restructure has resulted in a lean workforce that is better equipped to meet the needs of students who have more complex learning needs. Good investment in premises has resulted in the significant refurbishment of the South Hill site and the acquisition of new premises and provision at Middlesbrough. In addition, a new site due to open in September 2017 is being built in Newcastle. Managers are working closely with local IT companies to provide students with the opportunity to learn at an IT centre of excellence in order to develop the commercial skills that will improve their employment prospects.
- Leaders and managers work highly effectively in collaboration with new and existing partners to provide students with individualised learning opportunities at the college and at other learning settings, such as local further education colleges. As a result, student numbers have increased and the provision has diversified. For example, college staff provide students who have autism spectrum disorder with specialist support so that they can stay on their course and successfully achieve their qualifications at local universities and sustain employment in a local IT business.
- Leaders and managers have an accurate overview of the progress that students make over time. They use weekly staff meetings and termly reviews with parents and external professionals to monitor students' progress and to identify appropriate remedial actions so that all students make at least their expected progress.
- Leaders and managers focus well on improving the opportunities for students to develop skills for work. The number of students who successfully progress to positive destinations at the end of their course has increased and is now good. However, managers recognise that the development of additional partnerships with employers requires further improvement so that more students have the opportunity to develop their skills in a wider range of workplaces and, ultimately, to progress into paid employment.
- The curriculum meets the wide range of students' needs very effectively. Most students study on full-time courses at pre-entry level to level 2, and a few study part time. The curriculum includes a broad range of subjects including IT, emotional literacy, health and fitness, independent living, bicycle repair, horticulture and preparation for adulthood. Students develop their academic, vocational, personal and social skills very well; a small cohort of students study tailoring on a specialist programme. Students aged 16 to 18 are in full receipt of their study programme entitlement.

- The chief executive, the principal and the management team provide good leadership across the college. They motivate staff and reinforce the high standards of teaching and learning and support. Staff engage in a wide range of continuing professional development activities, such as in e-safety, mental capacity, functional skills, lesson planning, target-setting and positive behaviour management. Students receive good-quality support from the multidisciplinary team and learning support assistants.
- Leaders and managers have the skills, expertise and enthusiasm to drive forward further improvements. However, middle managers do not use data well enough to set, measure and achieve challenging improvement targets.
- Managers provide tutors with helpful feedback on how to improve their teaching skills after the observation of lessons. However, the feedback does not focus sufficiently on learning or on the progress made by students. As a result, a few tutors do not measure how much progress each student has made.
- Managers use performance management systems effectively to identify, support and, where appropriate, tackle underperforming staff.
- The self-assessment process is mostly accurate. Leaders and managers use feedback from students, staff, parents, carers and external professionals well to inform the assessment of the college's strengths and weaknesses. However, managers did not identify in the self-assessment report that discrete English and mathematics classes require improvement.

The governance of the provider

- Trustees are well qualified and have a wide range of expertise that they use to the benefit the college. They use their knowledge and good understanding of the college's strengths and weaknesses effectively to provide increased rigour in holding senior managers to account, as well as providing a clear strategic direction.
- Trustees have a good understanding of their strategic role in the management of the college. They effectively support and enable the leadership team to use its authority to take strong and decisive actions that improve the quality of the service for students, increase student numbers and reduce the running costs of the college.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Staff and trustees participate in regular training on safeguarding. As a result, they have a thorough understanding of the potential risks to students, are strongly focused on the needs of students and take the necessary measures to ensure that they are safe.
- Trustees, leaders and managers meet regularly to discuss any reported safeguarding incidents. They analyse the information well and use the expertise of the trustee with responsibility for safeguarding to inform management decision making and to improve staff practice.
- The strategy to ensure that students are protected from radicalisation and exploitation is particularly effective. Staff undertake a comprehensive 'Prevent' duty risk assessment of each student. They produce a plan which identifies the level of risk to students from exploitation, the need for external multi-agency support and the actions to take so that students understand the risks. Records of checks on staff, including criminal records checks, are up to date and accurate; the checks on agency staff are comprehensive.

- Health and safety audits are regular and thorough; individual risk assessments take good account of the individual needs of each student. However, a minority of staff do not know the actions to take in an emergency for the few students who have been issued with a personal emergency evacuation plan (PEEP).
- Students have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe when using the internet, and at college. They feel safe, they adopt safe working practices in practical learning sessions and they know how, and when, to report any concerns regarding their safety.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Students make good progress in developing their personal, communication and independence skills; they learn to manage their behaviour effectively and develop their ability to interact appropriately with each other and the wider community.
- Tutors' assessment of students' skills and knowledge is comprehensive and very effective. A detailed analysis of their behavioural and communication needs, which draws on information from parents, carers and previous school reports, results in a smooth transition into ESPA. However, at the Middlesbrough site, this assessment has not been conducted in a timely manner and, as a result, a few students do not make their expected progress.
- Almost all students benefit from thorough baseline assessments, which accurately identify their starting points in English and mathematics; this results in meaningful, relevant and challenging improvement targets being set for them by tutors.
- The college offers a broad and varied curriculum which is tailored to fit students' individual needs and interests and motivates them to learn. All staff, including an experienced multidisciplinary team, work successfully to design highly effective, individualised learning programmes, with relevant support, qualifications and goals.
- Staff provide students with highly effective feedback within lessons and during tutorial sessions, which helps them to understand how they can improve and how to make even better progress.
- Staff use their good skills and experience very effectively to ensure that students make good progress on a range of vocational courses. For example, in a specialist traineeship sewing class, students repair clothing for paying customers and operate electric sewing machines safely with great skill and concentration. Students further develop their writing and number skills well when invoicing customers, writing receipts and banking cash.
- Staff have high expectations of their students and instil a culture of perseverance and resilience in them. Students speak openly about topics such as disability, discrimination, bullying and equality. Students who have had negative experiences of education in the past speak positively about staff and their time at ESPA; they describe themselves as having more confidence and improved self-esteem.

- Staff work very successfully with parents and carers to share their views with leaders and managers through the frequent review process. Initial, termly and transitional reviews ensure that students' targets remain appropriate and progress is measured and celebrated. Staff regularly update students' achievement records and effectively capture the constant progress and improvement made by each student.
- Staff are well qualified and have received additional training on a wide range of topics; most notably autism spectrum disorder and communication. Staff confidently and effectively use a good range of communication methods in learning sessions. As a result, students find it easy to access learning and communicate effectively.
- In most lessons, knowledgeable learning support assistants (LSAs) work very effectively with students, encouraging them to be independent and to manage their own behaviour appropriately. However, in a few lessons, students rely too much on LSAs and seek their help before attempting to solve problems for themselves.
- Students develop their English and mathematical skills well in practical classes in most subject areas. Students enjoy the relevant and stimulating learning activities. However, in discrete English lessons, the less able students do not make the expected levels of progress, as tutors' expectations of them are too low.
- Staff have excellent links with local further education colleges, which enable them to offer students a more flexible and wider range of vocational learning opportunities. For example, some students attend local colleges to study for part of each week; many successfully complete at level 1 and progress to a level 2 qualification.
- Most tutors plan lessons that challenge students appropriately and support them to remain focused on their learning for prolonged periods of time. In a minority of lessons, appropriate learning resources are either not available or have not been adapted to meet the needs of the students. As a result, they quickly lose concentration and are unable to complete work to the best of their ability.
- Students on information and communication technology (ICT) courses at further education colleges are unable to undertake online research and complete their self-study assignments when they return to the ESPA sites as the IT infrastructure is unreliable. As a result, students are unable to maximise the opportunity to extend their learning and this hinders their progress.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

- Staff have high expectations of all students and work very effectively with those who have previously been excluded from, or have had negative experiences of education to help them succeed.
- Students who have not been in formal education successfully complete qualifications at level 1 at the college and progress to level 2 at local further education colleges, with support from ESPA staff.

- Students develop their confidence, and social and independent learning skills very well during their time at the college. For example, students who lack confidence and are unable to talk to other students on entry to the college are supported well and are now able to work successfully in a number of different learning settings, including local further education colleges and in the community.
- Students on the emotional literacy programme develop very good levels of personal and social skills which help to prepare them for life and work. Students demonstrate a better understanding of their emotions and behaviours and the impact these have on themselves and on others.
- Students develop good problem-solving and speaking and listening skills; they use a wide range of numeracy skills competently in most lessons and practical sessions. However, in discrete English and mathematics classes, the less able students do not always understand the relevance of the skills that they are developing for work and for life beyond college. As a result, they do not participate fully in the learning that is taking place.
- Students' attendance at lessons is mostly high. A few students have low rates of attendance; staff work tirelessly with them and their families and use a wide range of appropriate support strategies to improve their attendance.
- Staff provide very effective additional support for students who have autism spectrum disorder on courses at universities, further education colleges and at work.
- The specialist multidisciplinary team provides students with highly effective, individualised support. It also provides staff with ongoing training and support so that they are well informed and able to meet students' individual needs.
- Students are well prepared for life in modern Britain. Staff promote British values effectively during tutorials and in emotional literacy sessions. Students are able to discuss Brexit and the recent United States elections with confidence; they display very good levels of understanding of the topics and the associated implications. A small number of students are being supported to travel more independently to enable them to take an active part in the local community.
- Students participate in a wide range of additional activities. These include the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, sports, healthy eating, charity fund-raising events, games workshops at a local community café and visits to local places of interest. A few students and their families attend a 'flying with confidence' programme, which has been developed in collaboration with staff at Newcastle Airport.
- Staff provide students with good-quality information on a wide range of topics to help them to stay safe at college, in the community and online. Students have a good understanding of how to improve their health, well-being and personal safety; they know how to challenge bullying and they know whom to contact should they have any concerns. Students have good access to relationship counselling, male and female discussion groups and to highly specialised support from the multidisciplinary team at the college.

- Students receive good careers guidance and advice. Just over half of the students benefit from purposeful work placements in the community. This helps students to build on the skills learned at college very effectively, for example, by archiving sheet music in an arts centre, or developing horticultural skills as well as using IT skills to develop a website and promotional materials for a community garden project.
- Students are well prepared for work placements. They attend taster days, enterprise projects and visits to prospective employers so that they can meet the staff and gain a good understanding of their expectations. However, staff have correctly identified the need to develop further existing and new partnerships, so that students' opportunities to participate in a wider range of work placements and to move into paid employment are increased.
- Staff apply the specialist training they receive particularly effectively to support students who are vulnerable to extremist views. Staff have developed an innovative individual student risk assessment which is aligned to the 'Prevent' duty. Staff use risk assessment well to tackle students' inappropriate views and behaviour. They intervene effectively and swiftly when there have been instances of inappropriate racist language by students. For example, staff help students to understand that their use of racist language is inappropriate, illegal and is not tolerated at college, at work or in the community.
- Staff and students feel safe at the college. Staff use highly effective individual behaviour risk assessments and produce detailed plans that recognise and help to manage behaviour. They share behaviour improvement strategies, and communicate daily with parents using student diaries, so that students experience a high level of continuity and support in college and at home.
- Staff manage the secure storage and safe administration of student medication very effectively. Where appropriate, staff support students well to manage their own medication safely and independently.

Outcomes for learners

Good

- The majority of students progress well from their starting points and achieve or exceed the standards expected of them. A high proportion of students develop very useful skills and attain relevant qualifications which prepare them well for their next steps in education or training and in developing greater independence. Staff tailor learning programmes very effectively to match students' individual needs and interests and to ensure their success.
- Tutors and support staff ensure that all students receive very effective support which ensures that they make good progress throughout their programmes. The very close attention given by staff to ensure that all students do well has resulted in no discernible differences in the progress made by different groups of students.
- Staff set helpful and well-considered targets for students' learning and development which take account of views and advice from specialist partner professionals, parents and carers. Staff monitor students' progress very well and this ensures that students receive the right help at the right time, so that they continue to make good progress.

- The standard of students' work is consistently high and the most able students often exceed the requirements of their qualifications. They achieve their learning goals very well. For example, a few students have overcome a long-standing anxiety about mixing with other people by developing the self-confidence to join other students in a classroom for the first time. Several other students have used computer software to design and produce very high-quality graphic novels.
- Students enjoy learning because they recognise the progress that they are making and apply themselves well in lessons. The large majority of students value their learning and want to extend their levels of knowledge and achieve greater understanding of a subject. For example, in a lesson on emotional literacy, students discovered how to express a range of personal feelings through artistic performance and could confidently describe how this development in skills had increased their future employment prospects.
- The very large majority of students who complete their programmes progress to relevant further learning, greater independence and, for a few, paid employment. Since the last inspection, a few students have gained places at university and continue to receive highly effective support from ESPA staff to ensure that they graduate and succeed.
- Students who have the most complex and challenging disabilities gain very good skills and make good progress in becoming more independent in their everyday lives. For example, students learn how to make and maintain eye contact, to have a meal with other people, to make purchases in retail outlets and to travel without the need for constant supervision.
- A few students, especially the less able and those at ESPA's Middlesbrough site, do not make sufficient progress in developing their English and mathematical skills. Staff do not ensure that learning targets are challenging enough and the assessment of students' starting points is completed too late in their learning programmes.

Provider details

Unique reference number	131872
Type of provider	Independent specialist college
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	49
Principal	Paul Cook
Telephone number	0191 5165080
Website	www.espa.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 or above	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	12	20	7	7	1	2	0	0
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	49							
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors	None							

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the college coordinator, as nominee. 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 and telephone calls to gather the views of students 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.

Inspection team

Denise Olander, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
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Lesley Talbot-Strettle	Ofsted Inspector
Dan Grant	Ofsted Inspector

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