

Inspection of South Thames Colleges Group

Inspection dates: 4–7 February 2020

Overall effectiveness	Good
The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Education programmes for young people	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for students with high needs	Requires improvement
Previous inspection grade	Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

South Thames Colleges Group (STCG) is a large general further education college, formed in August 2017 by the merger of Carshalton, Kingston and South Thames colleges. The college is based in south-west London. It has sites in the boroughs of Kingston, Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth. A site at Merton, previously a part of South Thames College, is now Merton College.

STCG offers education programmes for young people and adult students across a broad range of subject sector areas. The largest subject areas include engineering and manufacturing technologies, construction, planning and the built environment, creative industries, and public services and care.

At the time of the inspection, 5,347 students were enrolled on study programmes. There were approximately 5,397 students on adult programmes. Courses in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) make up the highest proportion of adult learning programmes. STCG has 480 learners in receipt of high-needs funding, and 176 are in specialist provision. There were 124 students with education, health and care plans. There were 561 apprentices, with 381 studying on framework apprenticeships and 180 studying on standards apprenticeships.

What is it like to be a student with this provider?

Students can choose from subjects that appeal to their various career and study interests. These range from areas such as construction skills, business studies and health and social care, to specialist subjects such as aeronautical engineering and motorcycle maintenance.

Students at all campuses are taught by teachers who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable and who teach interesting lessons. As a result, students are captivated by what they learn and motivated to do their best. Most students achieve their qualifications and go on to further study or employment.

Leaders, managers and staff have successfully maintained the distinctiveness of the four component colleges of the group. Many students are proud to attend what they see as their local college. Students who travel across boroughs to attend one of the colleges do so because of the good reputation the colleges have.

Students and apprentices have a good understanding of how their studies will lead them to jobs or higher levels of learning. They have considerable exposure to employers in their chosen subjects, such as national construction companies, hotel groups and prestigious media companies. They gain valuable insights into the demands and rewards of work through site visits and work experience.

Staff have thought carefully about how to teach students topics beyond their vocational and academic subjects. These include information on being safe in college and in their own neighbourhoods, knowing why democracy is important, and understanding the risks and threats associated with extremist ideologies. Students have a solid grasp of how to be safe, and how to be responsible citizens.

For most students, studying at the college is hard and rewarding work. Students thrive on the expectations that staff have of them. They adhere closely to the professional attitudes that staff demand in terms of conduct, behaviour, dress code and diligence in their studies.

Apprentices who attend college for training sessions appreciate the extra guidance and support they receive as a result of being part of a college community.

Students with high needs who study on vocational programmes are taught the knowledge and skills they need to achieve their qualifications. They also gain in confidence and resilience. Students with high needs on foundation programmes improve their skills for independent living, but they are not challenged enough in, for example, their knowledge and use of English and mathematics.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Following the merger of Carshalton, Kingston and South Thames colleges, governors and senior leaders have been effective in securing a clear strategic direction for the South Thames Colleges Group. They have placed a strong focus on maintaining a distinct college ethos for each of the colleges in the group. As a result, each college has maintained good local connections and continues to serve its communities well.

Governors and leaders have taken decisive action to establish a relevant curriculum in each borough. They have streamlined the courses they teach at Carshalton and Merton colleges, so that students benefit from well-resourced, high-quality provision. They have closed a declining A-level provision at Kingston College. Managers have taken effective steps to reduce the numbers of subcontractors with whom they work. They have taken appropriate action to improve the quality of the remaining subcontracted provision. As a result, most areas of the college now perform at a consistently high standard.

Leaders have successfully created an inclusive college where students and staff feel valued and welcome. Managers and teachers plan their curriculum so that students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported appropriately. As a result, most of these students achieve at least as well as their peers. Adult students on ESOL programmes feel more confident in their daily lives and more able to integrate into their communities.

Leaders are highly effective in engaging employers in curriculum development. They work closely with local authorities and local businesses to plan for future skills needs. For example, they liaise with local hotel groups and hospital trusts. As a result, managers have developed a comprehensive curriculum offer so that students can plan their career paths. Managers in engineering have organised the curriculum so that students can follow routes in civil, electrical or mechanical engineering to meet their differing career aspirations. Leaders have successfully provided facilities and resources that support high-quality teaching. For example, an industry-standard motor vehicle workshop at Carshalton and extensive catering facilities at Merton provide students with realistic work activities that prepare them for employment with prestigious employers.

For most apprenticeships, employers understand the requirements of the programmes and contribute to the development of apprentices' training. As a result, most apprentices remain in employment on completion of their programme. A few apprentices, primarily in health and social care and those on some subcontracted provision, do not receive their full entitlement to off-the-job training.

Teachers benefit from a comprehensive staff development programme. They attend courses that keep them up to date with new subject knowledge. For example, beauty therapy teachers recently attended a course on tattoo removal, and motor vehicle staff benefit from a course on hybrid cars. Teachers working on courses for students with high needs gain expert knowledge on mental health and autism

spectrum disorder so that they can support students appropriately in the classroom. Newly appointed teaching and learning coaches support teachers successfully to improve their classroom practice.

Teachers across the colleges plan their teaching skilfully. They develop students' knowledge and skills in a logical sequence so that they can confidently complete more complex activities. Students and apprentices enjoy learning new skills and knowledge while on their courses. Level 1 students in hospitality and catering at Merton learn to make bread, lay tables correctly and serve drinks so that they are prepared well to work in the college restaurant. Apprentices on team leader apprenticeships perform tasks such as costing jobs accurately, so that they make a valuable contribution to the businesses in which they work.

Teachers use a range of challenging assessment activities to help students practise and reinforce their understanding of topics. On hospitality and catering courses, teachers use demonstrations followed by frequent practical assessments to ensure that students' technical skills are secure. In aeronautical engineering, teachers use probing questioning techniques to improve students' understanding of complex engineering concepts. Most students can apply their knowledge to new and varied situations. In media, teachers help students to apply their technical knowledge to projects that incorporate personal creativity, research and development. Students are proud of their achievements and are motivated to improve their skills and knowledge further. As a result, most students and apprentices produce high standards of written and practical work.

Students receive helpful feedback from teachers on their written and practical work. They use this effectively to improve their work and deepen their understanding of topics. However, too often, teachers on apprenticeship programmes do not provide apprentices with sufficiently detailed feedback on their work. They do not consistently require apprentices to improve their work or produce work of a professional standard.

Students with high needs receive much positive feedback on their work, but teachers do not routinely make clear what students need to do to improve. Too often, feedback is too brief, and teachers often rely on verbal feedback that is not recorded. As a result, students often cannot recall what they need to do to improve. The quality of teachers' feedback on access to higher education programmes is inconsistent. Teachers on these courses do not routinely identify what students need to do to improve so that they achieve higher grades. Too many students with high needs do not progress to the next level.

Most young people improve their skills in English and mathematics. A high proportion make good progress and achieve their qualifications. However, teachers in too many vocational lessons and those who teach students with high needs do not plan to develop students' English and mathematical skills well enough. Consequentially, students are not able to develop those skills confidently in vocational contexts. Assessors on apprenticeship programmes do not ensure that apprentices are prepared well enough for their functional skills examinations.

Teachers have high expectations of students to work hard. Most students have positive attitudes to their work, attend their lessons frequently and complete work within the expected timescales. Students' attendance and punctuality at English and mathematics lessons remain too low.

Most students receive effective careers guidance to help them plan their next steps. However, apprentices do not always know the range of opportunities available to them when they complete their programmes.

Students, apprentices and staff treat each other with respect at college and in the workplace. Students, including those with high needs, behave well in lessons and across campuses. Teachers ensure that students and apprentices know how to conduct themselves in professional contexts and are well prepared for future employment.

Staff focus effectively on students' personal development and their understanding of life in modern Britain. Adult students on ESOL programmes discuss how aspects such as the rule of law and democracy can be applied to their lives. Young people take part in skills competitions, organise events and participate in charity work. Students with high needs take part in competitions, attend cultural visits and display their work in art exhibitions. Students appreciate the support that they receive from staff and most gain in confidence and resilience while at college.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Governors, leaders and managers have created a strong culture of safeguarding within the college. As a result, staff and students understand their joint responsibilities in keeping everyone safe. Students and apprentices feel safe at college and in their workplaces. They know how to report any concerns that they might have. Students are aware of the risks posed to them in their lives outside college and understand how to keep themselves safe from radicalisation and extremist activity.

Managers have established suitable procedures that they use effectively to ensure that staff are safe to work with students, including students with high needs. Staff are trained appropriately in safeguarding, and have a sound understanding of the 'Prevent' duty. Managers have created strong and effective links with external agencies so that they can support students swiftly where appropriate.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders should ensure that teachers have high expectations of students to attend their lessons punctually. They should establish a consistent approach to rectifying poor punctuality so that students understand what is expected of them in all taught sessions.

- Teachers in vocational subjects should plan to improve students' English and mathematical skills so that they understand how to apply these confidently within the vocational context. Teachers should ensure that students with high needs improve their skills in English and mathematics throughout their programmes.
- Managers and teachers should take further action to improve students' attendance at English and mathematics lessons.
- Leaders and managers should ensure that employers in health and social care apprenticeships and in subcontracted provision have a good understanding of the requirements of apprenticeship programmes. They should monitor carefully that apprentices receive their entitlement to off-the-job training.
- Managers should ensure that students with high needs, adult students and apprentices receive detailed and helpful feedback on their work, so that they know what they need to do to improve.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130448
Address	Kingston Hall Road Kingston upon Thames Surrey KT1 2AQ
Contact number	02085462151
Website	www.kingston-college.ac.uk
Principal	Peter Mayhew-Smith
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	7–10 June 2016
Main subcontractors	Banham Academy London Borough of Wandsworth Lifelong Learning St Georges NHS Trust – National Breast Education Centre The Skills Centre London

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the Kingston College principal, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements including observing learning sessions, scrutinising students' work, seeking the views of students, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

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